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Mission to ASEAN



Research

Festivals in ASEAN

Foundations of the Creative Economy



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Contents

Foreword	4
Executive Summary	5
List of Abbreviations	16
1. Introduction	19
Background and context	19
Research objectives	19
Methodology	20
ASEAN overview	21
Strategic context: rise of the creative economy	22
A Festival typology	24
Festivals and the creative economy	25
2. The ASEAN festival ecosystem	27
BRUNEI DARUSSALAM	28
CAMBODIA	36
INDONESIA	44
LAO PDR	56
MALAYSIA	68
MYANMAR	78
THE PHILIPPINES	88
SINGAPORE	97
THAILAND	105
TIMOR-LESTE	112
VIET NAM	120
3. ASEAN Festivals: forging a creative future	130



Foreword

Festivals are more than celebrations. They are catalysts for creativity, cultural exchange, and inclusive growth. Across the ASEAN region, festivals animate public life, nurture talent, and connect communities. They create spaces for artistic expression, innovation, and dialogue, while contributing to economic diversification and sustainable development.

This report, *Festivals in ASEAN: Foundations of the Creative Economy*, offers the most comprehensive picture to date of the festival ecosystem across all eleven ASEAN Member States. It builds on the British Council's earlier research, "Festivals in South-East Asia (2021)", and reflects the resilience and adaptability of festivals in the face of unprecedented challenges – from the COVID-19 pandemic to climate crisis and shifting economic realities.

Drawing on new data, case studies, and insights from 80 festival managers and cultural practitioners, the study highlights the sector's ambitions and its critical role in shaping the ASEAN's creative economy. The findings underscore a lesson we consistently see across the region: festivals flourish when supported by strong networks, enabling policies, and innovative funding models. They are platforms for inclusion, sustainability, and digital transformation, values that resonate deeply with ASEAN's vision for a dynamic and interconnected region.

Looking ahead, the opportunities are clear. By investing in skills development, digital innovation, and cross-border partnerships, ASEAN can position its festivals as global exemplars of creativity and resilience. We hope this report serve as a resource for policymakers, cultural leaders, and creative entrepreneurs by informing strategies that ensure festivals continue to inspire, connect, and drive progress for generations to come.

UK Mission to ASEAN, the British Council, and the ASEAN Senior Officials Meeting on Culture and Arts (SOMCA) with the support of the ASEAN Secretariat wish to extend our thanks and appreciation to the festival practitioners for their generosity in providing insights into this research.

Executive summary

The research builds an extensive picture of the festival sector across the 11 Member States of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). The research forms a key part of the ASEAN-UK Advancing Creative Economy (ACE) Initiative. This aims to strengthen the creative economy and empower professionals and policymakers in ASEAN, by fostering collaboration and professional development, providing new research, resources, and knowledge exchanges. The programme is delivered by the British Council with co-funding from UK's Foreign and Commonwealth Development Office (FCDO) and developed in coordination with the ASEAN Senior Officials Meeting on Culture and Arts (SOMCA), with support from the ASEAN Secretariat. The research is undertaken by the Tom Fleming Creative Consultancy (TFCC) and its network of associates across ASEAN.

This 2026 study deepens and broadens the baseline “Festivals in South-East Asia” research, which was launched by the British Council in February 2022. Undertaken as the world re-emerged from the COVID-19 pandemic, this research mapped festival typologies and provided new evidence on festivals in terms of topics such as socio-economic impact, digital capacity and financial resilience across six ASEAN countries. Building from this initial 2022 report, our approach in 2026: (a) extends geographic coverage to all eleven ASEAN member states, (b) updates the dataset with 80 festival survey responses and 12 new case studies gathered post-pandemic, and (c) tests emerging priorities such as climate resilience, inclusion and blended finance models which were only starting to surface in 2022. As a result, this edition not only consolidates earlier findings, but also uncovers fresh opportunities and development needs for festivals - particularly in cross-border collaboration, skills

development and digital. Together the analysis presented in this report is set to inform ASEAN-UK policy dialogue under the ACE Initiative.

The notion of a ‘festival’ provides a catch-all term for a diverse range of events, gatherings, showcases, celebrations and more. Festivals tend to be live and in-person, although they have a growing and increasingly pervasive digital footprint which extends their reach and audience. Most festivals focus on a particular art form, creative sector, theme or agenda, or often a combination of these elements. Most festivals are also place-based, or at least are associated with a specific place before, in some cases, developing touring or franchise models. Plus, the majority of festivals derive their funding and source their labour, content and infrastructure, from a wide variety of sources, combining public and private funding, paid-for and voluntary labour, and dependent on the creativity and professionalism of artists and producers. Put together, festivals operate as catalysts for the creative economy, with direct and spillover effects to most parts of the value chain: from talent and skills development to showcasing new creative work; from operating as platforms for experimentation and innovation, to hubs of knowledge and cultural exchange. Festivals also play an important role in fostering cultural relations and brokering soft power, as well as contributing to tourism and in some cases attracting inward investment.

Coming in many shapes and sizes, festivals tend to reflect the realities of their cultural context. They express and amplify local cultures, and the challenges they face are symptomatic of the social-economic and political realities of each place. This is why

festivals are so important and so compelling: they shine a light on the realities of cultural practices in distinctive contexts, and they directly influence reform, innovation and growth of the cultural and wider social ecosystem. In turn, this inputs to the creative economy, driving innovation and nurturing pathways for creative talent.

This report describes the ASEAN festival ecosystem on a country-by-country basis. It provides a set of case studies and presents results from a region-wide survey to give insights on the current and changing reality for festivals in ASEAN and the ways festivals interface with the wider cultural sector and creative economy. Drawing on an ASEAN-wide survey, it also highlights trends and development needs and aspirations regarding skills and capacity-building, funding, partnership and infrastructure. The report reflects on the key qualities of the festival ecosystem in each country and at a regional level, and points to a set of strategic priorities to boost the resilience and sustainability of festivals. In addition, the report provides insights on the ways festivals are working to establish a more inclusive, equitable and environmentally responsible approach, operating as forces for good and contributing to sustainable development. Festivals can be incredibly adaptive and resilient, in part because many are produced by passionate, committed people for whom festival management is a labour of love. However, festivals across ASEAN have faced an incredibly difficult and unpredictable

period, forced into survival mode in an era of poly-crisis. The COVID-19 pandemic, natural disasters, political instability, censorship, financial pressures, acute climate crisis, and the rise of digital technologies, have required festivals to adapt or die. Unfortunately, many festivals have failed to adapt. But those festivals which have adapted, plus a new generation of festivals and events, provide ample room for optimism and demonstrate the lasting relevance and influence of festivals across ASEAN.

In some countries, festivals are riding a wave: with increased strategic and policy commitment to the creative economy comes fresh opportunities for festivals as a key development tool. Whereas in other countries, festivals struggle to survive and some have become dormant or underground, waiting for the political and economic reality to change. The contrasting opportunities and challenges for festivals across ASEAN is stark. This report provides evidence on the different realities of festivals in each country and describes elements they have in common as well as key points of difference.

The report concludes with some headline opportunities for festival development at the ASEAN level and with regard to ASEAN-UK collaboration and exchange. Festivals will continue to play a vital role in the regional and global creative economy. This report outlines how, why and what might happen next.

Key Findings



Festivals are catalysts for the creative economy

Across ASEAN, festivals are a key part of the enabling environment for creative talent. They provide the space for artistic development and experimentation, they nurture and showcase talent, and they generate income and business opportunities for creative enterprises and adjacent sectors such as tourism and gastronomy. Festivals are directly connected to place-based creative clusters and hubs, often growing from such contexts and showcasing the talent and creativity which resides in a city or region. Festivals are also key to market-making in the Creative Industries – e.g. showcasing talent, attracting consumers, buyers and collaborators.



Festivals are incubators for new types of cultural practice

Festivals are often instigated and developed by artists and creatives looking for a platform to develop and showcase their work, bridging gaps in the cultural infrastructure landscape. They provide a platform to creatives who would otherwise struggle to source ways to develop and showcase their work. They also provide a fertile testing ground for new work – from fostering emergent music scenes to experimenting with different cultural influences and technologies.



Festivals can energise and elevate city's cultural and creative ecosystem

Festivals are a key type of cultural infrastructure. There are many examples of festivals energising cities which were seen as in decline or lacking dynamism. Festivals can generate new cultural narratives and boost a city's cultural capacity and confidence. If linked to ambitious place-based cultural and creative strategies, festivals can elevate the overall role and impact of culture and support wider strategic goals such as boosting inward investment, attracting and retaining talent. However, for festivals to maximise their impact, they need to be supported as part of a committed long-term cultural and creative strategy, not seen as one-offs or as nice-to-have elements.



Festivals can be vital safe spaces for diverse and inclusive cultural expression

At their best, festivals in ASEAN support artists and cultural professionals from all backgrounds to develop and showcase their work. They champion the protection and promotion of diverse cultural expressions, support gender equality and embrace difference. This can be enshrined in festival policy and ethics, but most importantly it can be evidenced in the approach to programming, workforce development, communication and audience engagement. Some festivals with such an inclusive ethos face significant pressure - such as from sponsors and the State - to conform to less inclusive practices. Processes of censorship and self-censorship are everyday realities for festivals across the region and festival managers constantly need to weigh up the implications of their programming decisions with regard to raising funds and even being granted a permit (or having it retracted).



Festivals are important custodians of cultural heritage and indigenous rights

Many ASEAN festivals are rooted in a distinctive heritage context and play an important role in protecting, promoting and sensitively reinterpreting cultural traditions. State-led festivals tend toward a more authenticated or 'stage-managed' version of cultural heritage, while some independent festivals display a more intuitive approach to heritage, with room for innovation between traditions and newer cultural forms. Festivals of both types can be key to ensuring cultural traditions live on and for validating and promoting the cultures of indigenous communities. However, some (mostly State-sponsored) festivals can also serve to marginalise minority cultures and present dominant cultures rather than a more complex reality.



Festivals help to build awareness and mobilise action regarding local, regional and global challenges.

Many festivals operate at a hyper-local level as spikes of cultural activity in a specific district or city. They are often motivated by a responsibility to the locality – such as to supporting local talent, bringing communities together and / or enhancing the environment. They display a community and civic responsibility and contribute to what some call 'creative place-making'. Some of these festivals are also motivated by a wider set of regional or global challenges – e.g. they actively campaign and build awareness on climate emergency and associated topics such as deforestation, net zero and pollution. Festivals vary from the hyper-activist to a more moderate approach where responsible and ethical aspects are being adopted within their strategic and operational models. Most festivals would benefit from capacity-building and training to enhance their approach to sustainable and ethical event production.



Festivals are at different stages of digital development and innovation

Some festivals are pioneers in the ways they use digital technologies to enhance and amplify the festival experience. Mostly, but not exclusively, newer festivals are embracing the potential of digital technologies for all aspects of the festival value chain: from management systems to marketing, communication and ticketing; stage management and production to broadcasting. This is a huge potential growth area for ASEAN festivals as part of the wider creative economy. The rise of Artificial Intelligence, which can greatly enhance audience profiling and engagement; and the increasing pervasiveness of immersive technologies, which can deepen and extend interaction with festivals; present new opportunities for growth and diversification. Some festivals are also labs and incubators for digital innovation – e.g. in gamification or in the approach to monetising festival content. However, for many festivals, digital capacity is a major barrier to development and the digital divide among audiences and between different parts of the region mean that some festivals are unable to explore their full digitally-enabled potential.

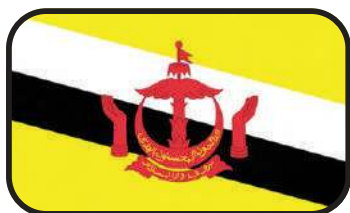


Festivals are pioneering different partnership and business models, but most are precarious and face financial challenges

Festivals across ASEAN are beacons of entrepreneurship and resilience. Setting up and sustaining a festival, whatever the size or flavour, involves a feat of resourcefulness and determination which should not be underestimated. The COVID-19 pandemic presented a huge challenge to all festivals and many did not come back in the following years. Shifts in policy priorities and reductions to State cultural funding have also had a damaging effect on the viability of many festivals. However, there are examples of good practice, with the rise of public-private partnerships– which co- invest in festivals- a welcome trend.

Festivals are also innovators when it comes to smart ticketing, such as utilising software to facilitate surge pricing, or providing ‘wrap around’ offers which include add-ons such as accommodation, transport, access to VIP experiences and more. Across ASEAN, there are multiple examples of festivals finding new ways to generate revenue, pooling many different income streams and unlocking both monetised and in-kind contributions to put on the show. However, most festivals operate on a not-for-profit or ‘break-even’ model, with a minority of commercial festivals managing (and increasingly ring-fencing) more lucrative for-profit markets. This has implications for cultural policy and funding, with most festivals in a precarious position, they require ongoing subsidy and incentives, as well as capacity-building and other types of support, if they are to deliver impact – such as to a thriving creative economy.

11 Festival Nations



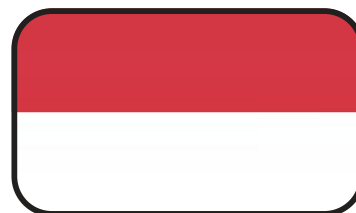
Brunei Darussalam

- ✓ **State-sponsored and managed festivals** dominate, with programming clustered in December in an attempt to keep locals in the country in the height of the holiday season
- ✓ **Emergent, fragile, but deeply resourceful and ambitious independent grassroots creative scene** – made up of gig-lancers who are collaborating to programme smaller-scale events.
- ✓ **Festivals are expected to respect national guidelines rooted in Malay Islamic Monarchy Philosophy (MIB)**, which set certain parameters on public expression. Censorship and self-censorship define the festival ecosystem.
- ✓ **Growing strategic awareness of the potential of the creative economy**, with an opportunity to position festivals as a catalyst for development.



Cambodia

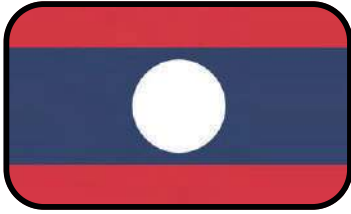
- ✓ **Heritage remains central to Cambodia's festival ecosystem**, while emerging contemporary festivals in Phnom Penh, Battambang and Siem Reap are drawing on the country's youthful energy to experiment with new formats and artforms.
- ✓ **Despite strong grassroots commitment and sporadic municipal and Ministry funding, most festivals operate without long-term strategic support**—relying heavily on corporate sponsorship, volunteerism and micro-donations to stay afloat. Skills gaps in technical production, curatorial planning and marketing persist, limiting growth and quality.
- ✓ **There is growing momentum for regional collaboration and professionalisation, with early partnerships emerging** (e.g. Tini Tinou Circus, Angkor Photo Festival). A recent working paper by the Creative Industries of Cambodia Association for Development and Advocacy (CICADA) offers a first step toward formal policy recognition—laying the groundwork to position festivals within a broader cultural and creative industries strategy.



Indonesia

- ✓ **Incredible diversity and range of festivals** across this vast, dynamic country, with a new generation of young, impact-facing festivals which focus on building creative communities and energising city development.
- ✓ **Policy leadership with an ongoing commitment to the Creative Economy via the Ministry of Creative Economy**. This also puts festivals to the heart of the nation's tourism development model.
- ✓ **The nation is growing as a hub and cluster for major regional creative showcase and trade events** – e.g. in visual arts, music and fashion. Jakarta is maturing as a global creative city.
- ✓ **Powered by the Indonesian Creative Cities Network, cities are collaborating and competing to build distinctive creative clusters with festivals as a foundation**. This includes a growing number of UNESCO Creative Cities, each with a creative specialism (e.g. Ambon – music, Jakarta – literature, Bandung – design).
- ✓ **Yogyakarta is a genuine festival hub for Indonesia**. Jogja Festivals convenes a network and partnership of festivals across the city, facilitating capacity-building and knowledge exchange and supporting festival development as a foundation for the city's Creative Economy.





Lao PDR

- ✓ **Religious and seasonal festivals remain central to cultural life**, while a modest independent scene is emerging in urban centres, shaped by grassroots initiatives, diaspora engagement, and informal creative spaces.
- ✓ **Most festivals operate without structural support, relying on short-term external funding, volunteer labour, and repurposed venues.** Skills development and technical capacity remain major gaps.
- ✓ **There is clear potential to strengthen Laos' role in regional cultural exchange**, but this requires investment in mobility, training, and recognition of festivals as drivers of creative and community development.



Malaysia

- ✓ **Post-COVID, Malaysia's festival sector is going through a fragile renaissance, with many new and emergent events and a reboot for older events.** Festivals can be found in every city and region across the Malaysian peninsular and Borneo, reflecting the ethnic and geographic diversity of the nation. **Existing festival hubs, including**
- ✓ **Kuala Lumpur and Georgetown (Penang), are being complemented by an impressive array of festivals** in states such as Perak and Sarawak. This includes festivals with a strong focus on nurturing the grassroots, protecting and promoting indigenous cultures and cultural heritage, and on activism regarding the climate crisis.
- ✓ **Many festivals operate in a precarious reality**, with limited and often short-term funding (State and private sponsorship), capacity and skills gaps for festival managers, and a lack of venues and other infrastructure (in more rural areas and smaller cities).
- ✓ **The absence of a coherent national Creative Economy Strategy at a Federal and State level (for most States), means that festivals are not positioned as part of a coherent development plan**, linked to other fields such as skills and education, enterprise, infrastructure, urban planning, and so on. This means they can sometimes be positioned as short-term fixes for the State, without a commitment to longterm strategic development of the cultural sector as a whole.
- ✓ **Where festivals are positioned as part of a long-term strategy for culture and the Creative Industries**, such as in via the recent Creative Industries Strategy for Downtown Kuala Lumpur, they have the potential to benefit from a wider set of enabling conditions such as access to skills and infrastructure, collaborative programming and communications. However, this will require new actions because such conditions are not yet in place in Malaysia.



Myanmar

- ✓ **Myanmar faces significant challenges, with cultural expression and practice often constrained by complex social and regulatory environments.** Despite these limitations, a quiet but determined cultural life persists, sustained by the dedication of artists, festival operators, and communities who continue to express their identity and creativity through informal and adaptive means.
- ✓ **Even before recent hardships, the Covid-19 pandemic placed immense strain on the country's cultural infrastructure**, weakening the capacity of festival organizers and deepening existing vulnerabilities. Natural disasters, including Cyclone Nargis in 2008, Cyclone Mocha in 2023, and the major earthquake in the Sagaing Region in 2025, have further impacted livelihoods, deepened inequalities, and added to the overall strain on daily life. Yet, amidst these overlapping crises, cultural expression has endured.
- ✓ **Artists and cultural practitioners continue to connect through small gatherings, informal networks, and cross-border collaborations** - including with those who have relocated or remain in temporary situations near international borders. These networks not only sustain morale but also preserve the cultural fabric of the nation, offering a quiet but powerful form of continuity.
- ✓ **While many established festivals remain on hold, their organizers remain actively engaged with both local and international peers.** Their resilience and readiness to revive events when conditions allow are a testament to the strength and commitment of Myanmar's cultural sector.
- ✓ **The international community has an important role to play in supporting this spirit** - by staying connected, offering platforms for collaboration, and helping nurture the creative potential that continues to thrive, even in the most testing of circumstances.



Philippines

- ✓ **There are festivals of every type across the incredibly diverse Philippine archipelago.** Metro Manila is the driving force for the nation's creative economy and hosts major festivals and events of all kinds. Other cities, such as Cebu and Baguio have a dynamic festival ecosystem, galvanised by their status as UNESCO Creative Cities.
- ✓ **The Government is prioritising the Creative Economy, with the ambition for the Philippines to be a premier creative hub by 2030.** Underpinned by the Philippine Creative Industries Development Act (Republic Act No. 11904) enacted in July 2022, the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI)-led inter-agency Philippine Creative Industries Development Council (PCIDC) is implementing the flagship *Malikhaing Pinoy Program (MPP)* to elevate Filipino creative firms, boost exports and foster international linkages. There is also a strong commitment to creative hubs and clusters, forging creative tourism, a Philippine Creative Industries Month, and an ambition to drive sector development at the ASEAN level.
- ✓ **Festivals often emerge from community initiative, with local governments and cultural councils playing a key role in sustaining them.** While national policy now recognises festivals as drivers of creative entrepreneurship and tourism, short funding cycles, infrastructure gaps, and uneven skills access outside urban centres continue to limit their long-term growth and impact.



Singapore

- ✓ **Festivals are central to Singapore's sustained role as the major market place for the ASEAN Creative Economy.** Singapore has, for now, retained its role as the major global hub for ASEAN – the premier meeting point between ASEAN and the rest of the world. With increasing competition from other major ASEAN urban centres, Singapore is constantly renewing its approach to culture and the Creative Industries.
- ✓ **Festivals in Singapore reflect the nation's cultural and religious diversity.** They also reflect the nation's role as a major trading and tourism hub, from large-scale sporting events such as the Grand Prix and Dragon Boat Festival to major festival and events programmes in key creative sectors such as Design, Visual Arts, Fashion and Publishing.
- ✓ **Festivals in Singapore also reflect the nation's rise as an innovation and tech hub,** with multiple events, meet-ups and network platforms in every conceivable area of creative technology, media and screen.
- ✓ **Government support is comparatively very significant, with large State-funded festival and events programmes** – targeting tourism development, cultural innovation and excellence, and Creative Industries growth. Similarly, private sector sponsorship and investment is well established, including international corporate sponsorship to levels not enjoyed in other ASEAN countries.
- ✓ **Singapore's economic success places challenges for the festival sector, with high costs (from venue hire to hotel rooms), and a very crowded events calendar.** It is particularly difficult for new independent festivals to find a space and break through, compared to other ASEAN countries.



Thailand

- ✓ **Festivals in Thailand are part of the everyday, fusing religion, cultural tradition and contemporary practice.** In some regions, festivals have grown into core products or experiences for the tourism economy, which has grown exponentially over a generation. But many festivals exist to nourish local audiences and combine multiple art forms.
- ✓ **In recent years, Government support for festivals has increased – as part of a wider strategic development programme for the Creative Economy.** The Thailand Creative Economy Agency works closely with a portfolio of festivals to leverage their role as catalysts for the Creative Economy.
- ✓ **Creative Industries and city development are closely aligned across Thailand, with many places anchoring their strategic planning to a key creative sector.** For example, Bangkok (Design), Chiang Mai (crafts and folk art), Suphan Buri (music). The UNESCO Creative Cities Network is a powerful driver of creative city development and guarantees a development pathway for festivals. Bangkok continues to evolve as one of ASEAN's most dynamic, diverse and compelling creative metropolises.
- ✓ **As with all ASEAN countries, gastronomy plays a starring role across the Thai festival ecosystem** – both through dedicated gastronomy festivals and events and as a core element in any festival programming.
- ✓ **Impact-facing festivals are becoming more common,** with particular attention paid to environmental agendas and the rights of diverse communities, including minorities such as Myanmar artists in exile.





Timor-Leste

- ✓ **A youthful and culturally rich nation, Timor-Leste is seeing the emergence of a small but vibrant festival scene**—community-led in rural areas and increasingly multidisciplinary in urban centres, with growing attention to environmental themes and reconciliation.
- ✓ **Most festivals are short-term, donor-dependent, and driven by volunteer networks, with limited public funding and skills gaps in curation, technical production, and long-term planning.** However, new training initiatives and partnerships are starting to address these gaps.
- ✓ **International collaboration remains limited and ad hoc, but interest is growing—particularly through Lusophone and regional partnerships.** Strengthening mobility, skills training and basic infrastructure would be necessary first steps before festivals can play a more strategic role in creative sector development.



Viet Nam

- ✓ **Since the drafting of its first National Strategy for the Cultural Industries in 2012, the festival sector in Viet Nam has been on a transformation journey.** Previous to 2012, most festivals were State-run and sponsored, designed to reinforce a national culture, with little room for independent cultural practice or innovation.
- ✓ **In recent years, the festival scene in Viet Nam has blossomed, with many small-scale, grassroots events emerging,** especially in Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi. For the latter, Hanoi's status as a UNESCO Creative City of Design has given independent producers confidence and the platform to develop new activities in addition to official events.
- ✓ **Festivals in Viet Nam are entering a new phase where commercial sponsorship is paving the way for new types of public-private partnerships,** such as those which support HOZO (Hò Đô) International Music Festival in Ho Chi Minh City. It is anticipated that the Government will pass a new law to ease the way for PPPs in culture.
- ✓ **The festival sector is also growing and diversifying in other regions of Viet Nam.** As elsewhere in ASEAN, the UNESCO Creative Cities Network is motivating and mobilising cities to develop cultural strategies and build their festival ecosystems – as evidenced in cities such as Da Lat (music) and Hoi An (crafts and folk arts).
- ✓ **In spite of significant growth, festivals remain relatively small-scale and fragile, liable to close down due to lack of funds, licensing and legal issues.** Skills gaps in event management and sustainability, as well as uneven access to infrastructure, persist. The new Cultural Industries Strategy (forthcoming) will seek to address some of the barriers facing independent cultural practice in Viet Nam.

Headlines from the Survey

80 festival managers across ASEAN supported this research by providing detailed and insightful responses to our survey.



Strategic ambition and aspiration

ASEAN festival organisers are driven by passion and social purpose, with many seeking to enhance cultural identity, strengthen the creative economy, and promote inclusivity and social cohesion.

Sustainability and long-term vision are front of mind, with 82% prioritising financial growth and 75% pursuing digital innovation and diversification to reach wider audiences.



Key capacity and skills gaps

Business planning, financial management, and human resources development remain underdeveloped among festival teams.

Project management for complex productions, contract negotiation, and sponsorship development are also identified as critical areas for capacity building.

Practical digital skills-from content production to CRM systems and accessibility tools-are unevenly distributed across the sector.



Key funding and support gaps

Almost all festivals surveyed face financial challenges which threaten their continuation.

Sustainability and long-term vision are front of mind, with 82% prioritising financial growth and 75% pursuing digital innovation and diversification to reach wider audiences.

Festival managers are keen to explore new funding mechanisms and to work in partnership with the state and private sector to establish a blended approach to financing festivals.



Major trends

Festival organisations are becoming more professionalised, with clearer governance structures and growing attention to impact measurement.

Regional collaboration is gaining momentum, with cross-border touring, co-productions, and knowledge-sharing creating new opportunities.

Community-driven formats, hybrid programming, and bilingual initiatives are emerging as defining features of the festival landscape.



Wider development considerations

Cross-border collaboration is a key growth driver:

68% want partnerships with international festivals, 52% seek co-productions and artist exchanges, and 53% call for shared programming and platforms with UK/international peers.

Innovation is also surfacing in audience

engagement and social impact- with many festivals placing strong emphasis on community participation, inclusion, and awareness-raising programmes (e.g. sustainability, heritage preservation).

Strong appetite for skills exchange, digital capacity-building, and policy dialogue across ASEAN and with UK institutions creates a natural platform for future collaboration and investment.



Noise Performance at Fundação Oriente, Timor-Leste (2023).

List of Abbreviations

ACE	ASEAN-UK Advancing Creative Economy (programme)
AEC	ASEAN Economic Community
AI	Artificial Intelligence
AMS	ASEAN Member States
AR	Augmented Reality
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BC	British Council
BGW	Brunei Gastronomy Week
CCI / CCIs	Cultural and Creative Industry / Industries
CENDANA	Cultural Economy Development Agency (Malaysia)
CIFF	Cambodia International Film Festival

CICADA	Creative Industries of Cambodia Association for Development and Advocacy
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
CREST PH	Government programme “Creative Roadmap / Ecosystem Strategy Towards 2030 – Philippines”
DIY	Do-It-Yourself
ESCAP	UN Economic & Social Commission for Asia & the Pacific
FCDO	UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office
FFD	Festival Film Dokumenter (Indonesia)
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GTLF	George Town Literary Festival
HAUS KCH	Creative-hub brand “HAUS Kuching” (Sarawak)
ISI	Institut Seni Indonesia (Indonesian Institute of the Arts)
JAFF	Jogja-NETPAC Asian Film Festival
JIS	Jerudong International School (Brunei Darussalam)
KKIFF	Kota Kinabalu International Film Festival
KL	Kuala Lumpur
Kemenparekraf	Indonesia’s Kementerian Pariwisata dan Ekonomi Kreatif (Tourism & Creative-Economy Ministry)
MAP	Melaka Art & Performance Festival
MCFA	Ministry of Culture & Fine Arts (Cambodia)
MIFFest	Malaysia International Film Festival
MIWF	Makassar International Writers’ Festival
MDEC	Malaysia Digital Economy Corporation
MOE	Ministry of Education
NADIR	Planned Brunei National Archives & Digital Repository / National Library
NETPAC	Network for the Promotion of Asian Cinema
NGO / NGOs	Non-Governmental Organisation(s)
NTFB	National Theatre Festival Brunei
PDR	People’s Democratic Republic (as in Lao PDR)
PPP / PPPs	Public-Private Partnership(s)
R&D	Research & Development
RI	Republic of Indonesia (in “Kemenparekraf RI”)
RIUH	Brand name of Malaysia’s travelling creative-lifestyle market (Malay “uproar”)
ROR	Revive Our Roots (Borneo ROR Fest)

SCENIC	Sabah Creative Economy & Innovation Centre
SME / SMEs	Small and Medium-sized Enterprise(s)
TFCC	Tom Fleming Creative Consultancy
UBD	Universiti Brunei Darussalam
UK	United Kingdom
UN-Habitat	UN Human Settlements Programme
UNCTAD	UN Conference on Trade And Development
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific & Cultural Organization
WMF	Warner Music Fest
WWF	World Wide Fund for Nature
XR	Extended Reality (umbrella for AR/VR)
YEE	Youth Entrepreneurship Ecosystem (Brunei Darussalam)

1. Introduction

Background and context

Festivals are the lifeblood of the ASEAN Creative Economy. From small DIY events to major international showcases, festivals of all sizes contribute to the region's cultural dynamism and act as catalysts for the creative economy. Research presented in this report explores the role of festivals in each of the 11 ASEAN Member States (AMS). It highlights the importance of festivals of all scales and points to opportunities to grow, diversify and connect festivals across the region and with the UK as a key strategic intervention for a sustainable and inclusive creative economy.

Commissioned by the British Council as part of the ASEAN-UK Advancing Creative Economy Initiative¹, the research seeks to understand how festivals are contributing to the region's creative economy. Taken broadly, this is to provide insight on how festivals are driving social, economic and of course cultural impact to catalyse innovation and growth in the creative economy.

The research also explores the aspirations and development priorities of festival managers and producers across the region, informed by a programme of interviews and a survey which includes targeted research questions on the skills and capacity needs of festival managers and their teams, key barriers to development, and opportunities and priorities for growth.

The research builds on and complements a 2022 study to map the role of festivals in the ASEAN Creative Economy (also commissioned by the British Council²).

This earlier Study featured 6 AMS³, with a particular focus on Indonesia. The 2022 Study also focused significantly on the impact of COVID-19 on festivals and the role of festivals in shaping the creative economy in a 'living with COVID' reality.

To provide a parity of data across the whole ASEAN Region, additional emphasis was placed on the following countries, which were not featured in 2022: Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Timor-Leste. These nations have a more emergent and fragile festival ecology than some of the other ASEAN nations, which brings a different set of perspectives on the role, development needs and potential of festivals in the wider creative economy.

Research objectives

The research aligns with the British Council's wider project objectives to:

Build network capacity for creative practitioners in the 11 AMS by developing insight and knowledge on the festival ecosystem.

Document and present the range of trends, gaps, opportunities and challenges faced by the festival ecosystem, including their contribution to the wider creative economy.

Document existing and potential connections between festivals in ASEAN member states and in the UK and to initiate the identification of future collaborations.

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/asean-uk-advancing-creative-economy-launched-to-foster-collaboration-and-development>

² https://www.britishcouncil.org/research-insight/festivals_south_east_asia

³ Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Viet Nam.



In addition, the research has sought to:

Identify ways to build the network capacity of ASEAN festivals by mapping key festivals and identifying shared aspirations and needs.

Documenting / modelling the range of festival platforms and typologies in ASEAN.

Providing a way of looking at how festivals are impactful for creative economy development. This includes how they relate to the creative economy policy and advocacy efforts in cities, countries or regions.

Through new evidence, positioning festivals as a key tool in culture-led development, city making, innovation and creative economy in relation to sustainable development.

To document and present the challenges faced by festivals in a fast-changing environment.

To identify priority development needs for festivals across ASEAN.

Methodology

The research was undertaken via a hub and spokes model. TFCC performed the role of research hub, coordinating the research, building from the 2022 Study, and collecting data and evidence across the 11 countries. TFCC associates and in-house researchers performed the 'research spoke' role—delivering tailored research in each of the 11 countries. This approach is typical of TFCC's international research, which is sensitive to cultural difference and supports a network of in-country experts to undertake research activities and utilise their local language and interpretation skills, as well as their privileged insights to the social, economic and political context.

Given the scale and diversity of the ASEAN region, the research did not seek to map every festival or event. Instead, it adopted a case study-led approach. For each country, an illustrative case study was developed alongside a concise overview of the national festival ecosystem, supported by shorter examples reflecting the diversity of festival types, artforms and organisational models across the region.

The analysis combined desk-based research, interviews, mini focus groups and a single extensive online survey conducted in 2025. The survey was addressed directly to festivals, with one response submitted per festival by producers, organisers or senior managers with a comprehensive understanding of festival operations, including programming, staffing, finances, logistics and skills needs. In total, 80 valid survey responses were collected, each representing an individual festival.

Survey findings were complemented by over 30 interviews with festival managers, cultural producers, government officials, private sector partners and creative enterprises, alongside collaboration with the British Council's Arts and Creative Economy teams and the ASEAN Secretariat. Rather than seeking a large sample, the research aimed for an illustrative and balanced spread by country, artform, size and organisational model. In Brunei Darussalam, survey responses were too limited to be reported quantitatively; insights were generated through in-depth interviews, small expert focus group discussions with artists, creatives and festival leaders, and desk research. While the 2022 study informed the research design, the analysis presented here is based primarily on new primary data collected in 2025.



ASEAN overview⁴

ASEAN was established in 1967 by Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand. The bloc has since expanded to include Brunei Darussalam, Viet Nam, Lao PDR, Myanmar, and Cambodia. ASEAN's primary aims are to accelerate economic growth, social progress, and cultural development while promoting regional peace and stability and offering a platform for member states to discuss differences peacefully (ASEAN, 2015).

Shared principles

ASEAN operates on the principles of mutual respect for the independence, sovereignty, equality, territorial integrity, and national identity of all nations. These principles are enshrined in the ASEAN Charter, which serves as the legal and institutional framework for the organisation (ASEAN, 2015).

ASEAN's commitment to economic integration is reflected in initiatives like the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), which aims to create a single market and production base. The AEC Blueprint 2025 outlines strategies to enhance connectivity, competitiveness, and inclusivity across member states (ASEAN, 2015).

Demographic profile

ASEAN's population is approximately 671 million as of 2022, making it the third-largest population bloc in the world, after China and India (ASEAN Statistical Yearbook, 2023). The region's median age is around 30 years, indicating a young and dynamic demographic profile (ESCAP, 2023).

This demographic dividend can drive economic growth and innovation if adequately harnessed through investment in education, culture, healthcare, and employment opportunities.

The ASEAN Sustainable Urbanisation Report (UN-Habitat, 2022) highlights the diversity of urban development within the region, from well-established megacities to emerging urban areas that until recently have been largely rural and agricultural settlements, requiring a variety of urban management solutions.

The region's economic diversity is stark. ASEAN includes both high-income countries like Singapore and emerging economies such as Cambodia and Myanmar. According to the World Bank data, Singapore's GDP per capita for 2023 was \$84,734 (World Bank, 2023b). In contrast, Cambodia's GDP per capita for 2023 was \$1,875 (World Bank, 2023c), while Myanmar's GDP per capita for 2023 stood at \$1,187 (World Bank, 2023d).

The region's youth unemployment rates vary considerably. For example, Indonesia's youth unemployment rate was around 13.94% in 2023 (Statista, 2023), while Cambodia's was notably lower at 0.72% in the same year (The Global Economy, 2023).

Toward cultural collaboration

In recent years, ASEAN Member States have sought closer cultural relations, often as an adjunct to economic and political relations. Plus, at the level of civil society, creative enterprises and cultural professionals are increasingly collaborating and trading across borders within the ASEAN, including festivals, but it is only in recent years that official

⁴ This overview draws heavily on the report: Arts and Technologies in ASEAN: Interconnected Parts. This report is also published by The British Council as part of the ASEAN-UK Advancing Creative Economy (ACE) programme.

ASEAN-level cultural partnerships and exchange activities have commenced.

The 2025 Malaysian Chairmanship of ASEAN has convened cultural professionals and intermediaries to explore greater integration and collaboration. Then in 2026, under the Philippine ASEAN Chairmanship, the Creative Industries will take centre stage. Among the proposed initiatives, as articulated through the Philippines' Priority Economic Deliverables, is the establishment of an ASEAN Center of Excellence for Creative Industries, supported by activities such as the 2nd ASEAN–UK Creative Economy Symposium and the Malilikhaing Pinoy (Creative Filipino) Expo with Malikhain ASEAN flair. These activities are sure to feature the role of festivals as catalysts for the Creative Industries.

Strategic context: rise of the creative economy

“The creative economy is one of the world’s fastest-growing sectors. Creative Industries create employment and income, promote innovation and contribute to societies’ well-being.”⁵

The global exports of creative goods represented USD 713 billion in 2022, while world exports of creative services reached USD1.4 trillion⁶. The Cultural and Creative Industries (CCIs) are also a major employer (predominantly via micro enterprises and freelancers), generating nearly 48 million jobs worldwide⁷. This includes significant informal CCI activity (especially in emerging markets), contributing an estimated 300

million people and projected to reach a global valuation of USD985 billion by 2023⁸. This means the CCIs provide a major role in poverty alleviation and pathways from the informal to formal economy.

It is unsurprising therefore that much of the strategic impetus for the Creative Economy is understood through a prism of economic growth. Yet the wider value of the CCIs, not least to the role of culture as a foundation for sustainable development, is gaining increased recognition. For example, organisations such as UNESCO making it clear that a high growth creative economy is not possible if the status of the artist is not protected and celebrated (e.g. supporting artists to earn a sustainable living, to freely express themselves, and to live free from exploitation); and that by supporting diverse arts and cultural practice through subsidy and a set of enabling conditions, talent can thrive, which in turn generates opportunities for commercial development and economic growth.

This is where festivals are so important; they bridge the intrinsic value of cultural practice with professionalisation, enterprise and trade in the commercial CCIs. They are hubs and platforms for talent development, and they showcase (and generate) intellectual property which can in turn be monetised or can generate symbolic capital which delivers spillover effects across the economy.

Moreover, festivals are key types of ‘soft infrastructure’ for artist development, providing sources of inspiration and work from which other creative activities can flourish.

⁵UNCTAD (2022), *Creative Economy Outlook 2022*.

⁶UNCTAD (2024). *Creative Economy Outlook 2024*. <https://unctad.org/publication/creative-economy-outlook-2024>

⁷UNESCO (n.d.). *Why Creative Economy in 2021?* <https://en.unesco.org/commemorations/international-years/creativeeconomy2021>

⁸Buchoud, et al (2021). *Task Force 5: 2030 Agenda and Development Cooperation – Creative Economy 2030: Inclusive and Resilient Creative Economy for Sustainable Development and Recovery*. https://www.t20italy.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/TF5_PB01_LM02.pdf

In ASEAN, the creative economy has gained significant strategic traction in recent years. New strategic frameworks, road-maps and policies are under development or have been finalised in countries as diverse as Viet Nam, the Philippines, Indonesia, Singapore and Thailand. These are featured in the country chapters of this Report.

Regional and Local Government have also begun to prioritise the Creative Industries as a key driver for economic diversification, employment generation and innovation, with Creative Mapping Studies, Blueprints and Strategies increasingly common. Often these underpin broader strategic goals, such as to boost inward investment and tourism, or to enhance city branding and soft power – as evidenced through the growth of applications to the UNESCO Creative Cities Programme.

Put simply, the creative economy has become a big deal for policy-makers, both at the ASEAN level and for individual nations, regions and municipalities.

However, across ASEAN, there is still a strategic gap between the rhetoric and associated ambition of the creative economy narrative, and the conditions to deliver success. In part, this is due to a still emergent cultural policy landscape, where culture, which is foundational to any ‘downstream’ commercial success in the Creative Industries, remains for the most part poorly funded and lacking appropriately resourced and managed incentives, regulations and infrastructure.

Such gaps are also in part due to the highly informalised and thus precarious reality for many cultural professionals and creative entrepreneurs. It is hard to make a living from creativity and cultural expression, especially if intellectual property management systems are weak or under-coordinated and if social security and

remuneration systems fail to protect freelancer or ‘gig-lancers’. There is of course huge variation across ASEAN in terms of the working conditions of creative enterprises, but it is not easy anywhere to make a living and then go on to grow a business in this sector.

This reality is in evidence across the ASEAN festival landscape, which is characterised by precarious working conditions, low pay, high risks and limited opportunities for career progression. Such matters are explored in the following sections. They highlight the structural challenges of establishing a mature, inclusive and fair creative economy, with festivals illustrative of such challenges while also, at their best, demonstrative of how a functioning, sustainable and inclusive creative economy can be built.

A Festival typology

In the 2022 report: Festivals in South East Asia – Catalysts for the Creative Economy, we developed a basic typology of festivals. This remains valid as way of understanding the diversity of vision, mission, model and impact across the ASEAN festival landscape. The typology is presented below with some revisions and one additional category. Most festivals are in reality a hybrid of more than one type of festival, but this typology helps understand the broad scope of the festival concept.

a. Traditional rites / rituals, often linked to religion or folklore. Tend to be locally driven and on key fixed dates / seasons. Vital to social and cultural identity. Some are being positioned for tourism. Traditional festivals which have been adapted as tourism products. They have some historic provenance but are hyped-up or commodified for incoming tourists (consumers).

b. Crowd-based festivals with contemporary programming of popular art forms, especially music. Influenced by the western 'Glastonbury' model – tend to be large scale productions aimed at urban millennials and tourists. They sometimes involve new commissioning. Part of a wider circuit of festivals. Professionally produced and commercial.

c. Sector-focused festivals to boost industry profile, facilitate networks, build audiences and support industry development. These include film, music, publishing, gaming, visual arts and design festivals with a 'meet' market and showcase element. These are usually place-based; some national or regional; most have some international element. Most showcase rather than commission new work. They have a strong digital component to facilitate trade and exchange.

d. Theme / issue – based festivals. These are usually cross-art-form and place-based. They play a convening and awareness-raising role. They also commission new work as well as showcase existing work. Themes and issues include environmental sustainability, equality, and/or 'niche' communities of interest – e.g. food, sports, hobbies etc.

e. Place-based – e.g. city festival, rural arts festival etc. These are community-building events, often cross-art-form, with multiple strategic objectives, from building audiences for culture to civic pride; from bootstrapping cultural capacity to place-branding, inward investment and tourism.

f. Art-form-specific festivals. These focus on one art form and combine development, showcasing and exchange activities. This includes, for example, literature festivals, poetry festivals, handicraft festivals, and film festivals. These festivals are becoming increasingly rare – as art forms converge and as digitalisation facilitates sector-based networking and exchange.

Festivals and the creative economy

As indicated by the above typology, festivals have a diverse spectrum of aims, objectives and functions. Again drawing on and adapting our 2022 research, across ASEAN we can see festivals which cascade many different outcomes. For example:

Festivals are catalysts for story-telling and cultural identity. Festivals contribute highly to people's senses of community and place. They can reflect the origins of the celebrated people and reflect the cultural influences that formed their identity.

Festivals are acts of collective memory and of changing traditions. Festivals reflect on the shared (and contested) memory, knowledge and experience of a particular group of people.

Example: Chapei Dang Veng Festival in Phnom Penh.

Festivals are active place-makers –

dynamic drivers of social and cultural development. Most festivals take place in the same location. This gives a sense of continuity, besides building the festival's identity. In certain cases, festivals are created to provide a space for the locals to express themselves and to overcome social challenges.

Example: KreatifKL in Kuala Lumpur activates the historic downtown as a creative district through more than 100 pop-up arts events.

Festivals provide vital work for freelancers and micro-enterprises –

which make up the majority of the CCIs. They also provide opportunities for skills development and networking, as well as incubating projects which can then go on to drive new business development.

Example: In Kuala Lumpur, RIUH's roving creative markets provide regular paid gigs and sales outlets for hundreds of Malaysian freelancers and micro-brands.

Festivals are platforms / spaces for talent development and creative expression. Festivals may provide space for new creative expressions and to support emergent talent. Such festivals act as open platforms for innovative works and ideas which would be difficult to express in traditional festivals.

Example: Angkor Photo Festival & Workshops gives emerging Asian photographers free training and public shows.

Festivals are enablers of collaborative practice, R&D and innovation. The programmes of such festivals may include open invitation for artists to work on collaborative projects, or to be connected with artists from different genres, cities or even countries. Such festivals are usually more open to new ideas and provide the artists freedom to work on their project.

Example: Jogja-NETPAC Asian Film Festival pairs screenings with project markets that link Indonesian directors to regional co-production partners.

Festivals animate and energise the rest of the cultural landscape – including key venues and cultural districts. They provide content, draw audiences and actively reinvent cultural infrastructure.

Example: Bangkok Design Week fills disused warehouses, riverside walks and galleries with installations, boosting year-round footfall for nearby venues.

Festivals can offer safe spaces for diverse cultural expression. The process of festival development can protect and nurture diverse talent which may feel threatened by the cultural mainstream. This includes women and minorities, plus disabled artists and audiences. Such festivals give voice to diversity and help to build awareness and tolerance, often in hostile environments. The creative economy depends on diversity and inclusion, with festivals playing a vital role. **Example:** Gandang-Ganda sa Sariling Gawa! in Manila creates a welcoming, women-led art fair where female and non-binary makers can sell work and build networks.

The ASEAN festival ecosystem

Festivals across ASEAN come in multiple forms, all with incredibly diverse origin stories. There are too many to list, let alone feature, and the festival ecosystem changes from day to day, place to place. This Section seeks to **‘freeze the frame’** and reflect on the current profile and dynamics of the festival ecosystem in each of the 11 AMS. This includes an overview of key development challenges and opportunities for growth and collaboration. With highlights from the Survey, case studies and ‘ones to watch’, this provides a simple aerial view. We recommend the reader then deep dive into each country by plugging into key networks and of course participating in as many festivals as possible.



The geographical map of the ASEAN region, and Timor-Leste.

Brunei Darussalam

Diverse, dynamic,
transformational festivals



Overview

Brunei Darussalam is a small, sovereign monarchy located on the northern coast of Borneo Island. The population is largely urban, concentrated in Bandar Seri Begawan, the capital, followed by Kuala Belait, and Tutong.

Cultural context

Brunei Darussalam's cultural identity is deeply rooted in Malay traditions and Islamic practices, guided by the national philosophy of Melayu Islam Beraja (Malay Islamic Monarchy), which influences policies around heritage, identity, and cultural values. Heritage arts such as silat, traditional weaving, and Islamic calligraphy remain prominent, underpinning national and religious celebrations, as well as community life.

Brunei Darussalam is progressively enhancing its Cultural and Creative Industries (CCIs) as part of its broader national development goals, in line with the aspirations of Wawasan 2035⁹. The National Development Plan 2024–2029 reflects a strengthened commitment to positioning CCIs as contributors to economic diversification, youth development, and cultural enrichment.¹⁰

The government's role has been central in laying the groundwork for the sector, beginning with the 2012 National Action Plan for the Creative Industries, which introduced key initiatives in talent development, cultural outreach, and international promotion. Recent strategies further build on this foundation, with investments directed toward expanding access to creative education, enhancing public infrastructure such as the Royal Regalia Museum, and establishing new institutions including a National Gallery, National Library (NADIR), and a planned Creative Industry Hub. The establishment of a Creative

Industry Steering Committee further reflects efforts to strengthen coordination and explore employment pathways for with youth in creative fields.¹¹

At the heart of Brunei Darussalam's emerging CCI landscape are a number of key sectoral strengths, particularly:

- Youth-led creativity and entrepreneurship
- Digital media, animation, and game development
- Heritage-based crafts and performance traditions

These strengths are being actively supported through government-led innovation spaces such as iCentre, CRAFT, and K-Hub, as well as entrepreneurship initiatives like Youth Entrepreneurship Ecosystem (YEE) and iUsahawan. These platforms promote a dual approach-fostering digital innovation and entrepreneurship while also safeguarding Brunei Darussalam's rich cultural heritage.

Regionally, Brunei Darussalam is expanding its engagement with ASEAN cultural networks. The North Festival, held in Singapore in 2024, brought together more than 40 Bruneian creatives and entrepreneurs for a curated programme of talks, workshops, and exhibitions. Such initiatives support Brunei Darussalam's integration into the regional creative economy, offering opportunities

"Our first bilingual panel drew attendees who'd never met before—it was a wonderful breakthrough for audience unity."

— Bruneian Creative

⁹*RKN12: Understanding Brunei's \$4 billion development plan, BizBrunei*, <https://www.bizbrunei.com/2025/05/rkn12-understanding-bruneis-4-billion-development-plan/>

¹⁰*Twelfth National Development Plan (RKN12), Ministry of Finance and Economy, Brunei Darussalam*, <https://www.mofe.gov.bn/Shared%20Documents/RKN/RKN12%20-%20English.pdf>

¹¹*RKN12, BizBrunei*

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Meanwhile, the local creative ecosystem continues to evolve through the active participation of independent and community-led initiatives. Notably, Kitani Kreatif and its knowledge-sharing platform Kitani Berkongsi are helping to cultivate a culture of peer learning, collaboration, and creative leadership.¹²

Together, these public and community-based efforts illustrate a multi-faceted national approach to CCIs—balancing cultural preservation with future-oriented innovation. Initiatives across policy, education, infrastructure, and entrepreneurship are laying the groundwork for a more dynamic and resilient creative economy, with festivals, digital platforms, and community hubs emerging as important spaces for artistic expression, youth participation, tourism development, and social engagement.

Festival landscape

Brunei Darussalam's festival sector includes both government-supported initiatives and an emerging independent scene. Government-led festivals, notably the annual Brunei December Festival and Gastronomy Week, contribute significantly to domestic tourism, with relatively low-key international dimensions. Though organised from the top-down by the Government, they do provide some income and development

opportunities for independent cultural organisations and producers.

Similarly, there exists a large number of 'gig-lancers.' This group of hobbyist content creators are known to severely undercut the screen industry market because media production is not their main source of income, and they can afford to take on projects for a fraction of the cost of a wholly dedicated professional media production business. This group presents limited opportunities for employment as the gig-lancer economic model generally dictates no budget allocations for free-lance or permanent crew. Rather, many of these projects are solo or 'friend crewed' productions and are not realistic in relation to the actual costs associated with industry-standard content creation.

Audience engagement across Brunei Darussalam's festivals often reflects the country's linguistic diversity, with different language groups engaging with distinct cultural offerings. Events delivered in English primarily attract expatriates, urban youth, and professionals in creative industries, while Malay-language festivals resonate strongly with broader local audiences, particularly outside urban centres. Few events have successfully bridged these audiences, despite clear potential and growing interest in integrated, bilingual programming formats.

"We were so energised by the Design Week workshops—they really sparked new ideas for local creatives."

— Bruneian Creative

¹¹ Brunei businesses connect with Singaporean counterparts at The Idea of North, BizBrunei (published 21 September 2024), <https://www.bizbrunei.com/2024/09/brunei-businesses-connect-with-singaporean-counterparts-at-the-idea-of-north/>

¹² Kitani Kreatif launches Kitani Berkongsi, Al Creativv, <https://www.aicreativv.com/post/kitani-kreatif-launches-kitani-berkongsi>

Resources and Tourism to stimulate domestic tourism and support the growth of the cultural and creative industries. Taking place each year throughout December, the festival brings together a wide range of events across all districts-spanning arts and culture, food and lifestyle, sports, and innovation.

The festival reflects broader national efforts to diversify the economy through tourism and the creative sector, providing a platform for local talent, SMEs, and creative entrepreneurs to showcase their work and engage new audiences. Government backing includes coordination support, promotional visibility, and opportunities for partnership across public and private sectors.

The Brunei December Festival has quickly become a key moment in the national calendar, helping to raise the profile of local cultural production and demonstrating the potential of festivals as drivers of community engagement and economic development.

Funding dynamics

Festival financing in Brunei Darussalam is largely short-term and assembled on a project-by-project basis. While public grant schemes and institutional backing provide important entry points, most organisers rely on a mix of small-scale corporate sponsorships and personal or community resources to deliver events. These sources often cover basic logistics but are rarely sufficient to support full production costs or long-term planning. Without access to flexible or multi-year funding, organisers face challenges in scaling up or sustaining promising initiatives. Strengthening financial planning and diversifying funding models could help unlock growth and support the development of a more stable and professional festival ecosystem.

Skills development initiatives

Skills development in Brunei Darussalam's festival sector remains largely informal and experience-based. Organisers often build their capabilities through project work, relying on peer exchange and trial-and-error approaches. Occasional learning opportunities-such as workshops embedded in events like UBD's Design Week or game jams supported by the Brunei Innovation Lab-provide valuable exposure but tend to be standalone sessions without follow-up or accreditation. Currently, there are no formal pathways in festival production, arts management, or cultural leadership.

Local skills needs and impact

Brunei Darussalam's festival sector would benefit from expanded training opportunities across both creative and technical domains. There is a strong case for developing multi-year fellowships or mentorship schemes in arts administration to support professionalisation. Technical skills in areas such as live sound, lighting design, and stage rigging remain limited, with no established local training pathways. Capacity in digital promotion-including social media strategy, SEO, and audience analytics-also remains underdeveloped, affecting outreach and visibility. Formal training in fundraising and bilingual communication is scarce, despite their importance for grant applications, corporate engagement, and reaching both Malay- and English-speaking audiences. Targeted, accredited programmes in these areas could help build a more sustainable and skilled festival ecosystem.

“To only focus on the economic value of the cultural and creative industries is devaluing it”

— Aqilah Ali, CEO and co-founder of Kitani Kreatif, as quoted in Rafidah Hamit, Kitani Kreatif launches Kitani Berkongsi, Al Creativv, 25 Oct 2024

Brunei Game Jams - Seeding Skills and Strengthening Creative Ecosystems

Brunei Darussalam's 48-hour game jams, supported by the Brunei Innovation Lab, offer a hands-on platform for digital upskilling and cross-disciplinary collaboration. Open to students, hobbyists, and professionals, these events bring together small teams to develop original games tied to local themes-blending creativity, coding, and cultural relevance.

The format fosters peer learning and talent discovery, while highlighting the need for follow-up pathways such as mentoring, showcases, and regional exchange.

"The game jam was a perfect example of how hands-on collaboration can unlock fresh talent we never knew existed."

- Bruneian Creative

Positioned at the intersection of tech and the arts, game jams illustrate how low-cost, practice-based models can activate emerging talent and contribute to a more connected and digitally literate creative economy.

There is growing interest in engaging with international partners to adapt mentorship models, explore co-produced showcases, and participate in broader regional initiatives. Past British Council-supported workshops laid the groundwork for capacity-building, and there is continued interest in importing mentorship frameworks, co-producing showcase events, and exploring UK-Asia Creative Partnerships. Such collaborations are seen as valuable avenues to strengthen skills, increase visibility, and support longer-term development aligned with both national aspirations and regional framework.

International collaboration potential

Brunei Darussalam's festival sector presents strong potential for deeper regional and international collaboration. Within Borneo, interest is growing in cross-border exchange with Sabah, Sarawak, and Kalimantan-particularly to share programming models, compare licensing processes, and explore pooled resources for funding and logistics.

At the ASEAN level, there is clear value in formalising collaboration to improve access to multilateral grants, co-develop touring circuits, and build shared visibility. Cross-border partnerships are seen not only as creative exchanges but also as pathways to develop more sustainable funding models, including joint sponsorship approaches and shared seed-funding pools.

Festivals to Watch

A number of emerging festivals are helping to shape Brunei Darussalam's creative and cultural landscape. Some notable examples are listed below. While this list showcases selected examples, it is by no means exhaustive and does not capture the full breadth of Brunei Darussalam's cultural calendar and festival landscape.

Brunei Gastronomy Week (BGW)

A week-long culinary showcase in Bandar Seri Begawan featuring chef masterclasses, themed food trails and cultural dining experiences that celebrate Brunei Darussalam's gastronomic heritage in partnership with the Tourism Board and international guest chefs.

National Theatre Festival Brunei (NTFB)

Launched in 2021 by 247 Studios at the JIS Arts Centre under the banner "A New Beginning," NTFB is Brunei Darussalam's first dedicated theatre festival, combining main-stage productions, participatory theatre-games workshops and side-events to nurture emerging drama talent, funded through private sponsorship and ticket revenues.

Brunei December Festival

An annual "event season" each December designed to spur domestic tourism through a programme of concerts, food markets and cultural fairs-organised by Brunei Tourism with permit waivers and volunteer pools, but highly competitive for venues and promoters.

Prism Student Film Festival

Hosted by the Universiti Brunei Darussalam, this growing festival began as a student-only competition and now welcomes public and international short-film submissions, complete with jury awards and filmmaker networking sessions.

Brunei Film Blitz

Part of the December Festival, this national film strand collaborates with foreign embassies and the Ministry of Culture to programme local and regional titles, raising Brunei Darussalam's profile on the ASEAN film map.

Brunei Design Week

Inaugurated in 2021 by UBD's Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences with curation by Dr. Lopez, this hybrid series of talks, workshops and exhibitions spotlights product, graphic and spatial design innovations in Brunei Darussalam.

Brunei Indie Game Jam

Periodic 48-hour hackathons supported by Brunei Innovation Lab that bring together the country's nascent indie game-development community to collaborate on rapid-prototype challenges and public showcases.



Dance Performance at National Theatre

Case study

National Theatre Festival Brunei (NTFB)

Instagram: @ntfbrunei



- ✓ Example of a festival fostering a national theatre scene – crystallising cultural identity and energising local creators.
- ✓ Festival-driven skills accelerator – pairing performances with expert talks and forums that systematically upskill local creatives and embed continuous professional development.
- ✓ Example of an ASEAN peer-learning network – regional festival ties and guest mentors connect Bruneian theatre across Southeast Asia.

Launched in 2021 under the banner “A New Beginning,” the National Theatre Festival Brunei (NTFB) is the country’s first dedicated performing arts festival of its scale with theatre at its core. Conceived and delivered by a network of local practitioners, it seeks to nurture emerging talent, widen public appetite for live drama-especially among young people-and position theatre as a viable, vibrant strand of Brunei Darussalam’s creative economy. The Festival, which takes place at the Jerudong International School (JIS) Arts Centre, is financed by the Ministry of Culture, Youth, and Sports and through private sponsorship and activity-based revenue streams, including ticket sales and participatory side-events such as theatre games.

NTFB grew out of Brunei Darussalam’s mini “creative boom” of the late 2010s and from the organisers’ experiences at the Asian Youth Theatre Festival. While a surge of new content-videos, film projects, marketing campaigns and stage pieces-was evident after 2016, the audience base remained fragmented along linguistic lines: Malay speakers rarely attended English language performances and vice versa. The Festival was therefore imagined as a neutral, celebratory platform where both audiences could encounter original work, and where companies would be encouraged to experiment across languages.

Staged each August - with the exception of the second edition, which took place in December during Brunei December Festival - to coincide with the national school holidays, NTFB offers a curated mix of ticketed performances, free public showcases, and youth-focused workshops. All participating troupes are required to present new, original material that embeds elements of Bruneian life-whether through language, narrative setting, design motifs or performance style. The forthcoming fourth edition will explore the theme “Rooted in Bruneian Culture,” prompting artists and audiences alike to reflect on the question “What is Bruneian theatre?”

Beyond the stage, the Festival hosts an intensive programme of talks and practical workshops led by industry professionals, ministry officers and academics. These sessions include acting technique and technical production to discussions. Between editions, the organising team also “upskills outward,” completing internships and residencies in other ASEAN countries, like Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore; the know-how they bring home-stage management, dramaturgy, festival logistics-feeds straight into each new NTFB edition.

“[We want] to foster a wave of original Bruneian theatre that defines our own voice. When people hear ‘National Festival of Brunei— NTFB,’ they should know it instantly and feel compelled to join.”

— Syazni Bakar, Co-Founder of NTFB

Initial workshop series have been delivered almost entirely by Bruneian experts, but from 2025 the team plans to invite mentors from across South-East Asia to widen perspectives and foster cross-border collaboration.

A new Drama Competition, organised in partnership with the Ministry of Education (MOE) and the Literacy Bureau (Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka), will debut in the next edition, further incentivising the creation of original local scripts.

Looking to the future, organisers want the festival to foster a Bruneian theatre scene. Their priorities are threefold. First, they aim to ignite a steady flow of original scripts, staging and design that wear Bruneian identity proudly drawing on local languages, kampong imagery and oral-storytelling forms. Second, they plan to secure NTFB’s place in the national calendar through a durable mix of private sponsorship, ticket income and strategic public support. Finally, they intend to position NTFB as a recognised waypoint on Southeast Asia’s theatre circuit, fostering residencies, co-productions and touring showcases. In short, the goal is for Bruneian theatre to remain rooted locally while earning visibility and respect - well beyond Brunei Darussalam’s borders.

“A lot of our work here is usually either an adaptation from other countries, especially like Broadway or West End. But there are more and more local work that has been created over the past few years.(...) so we urge troupes to write from what they know — our customs, our everyday stories— so we can craft a theatre identity that is unmistakably Bruneian.”

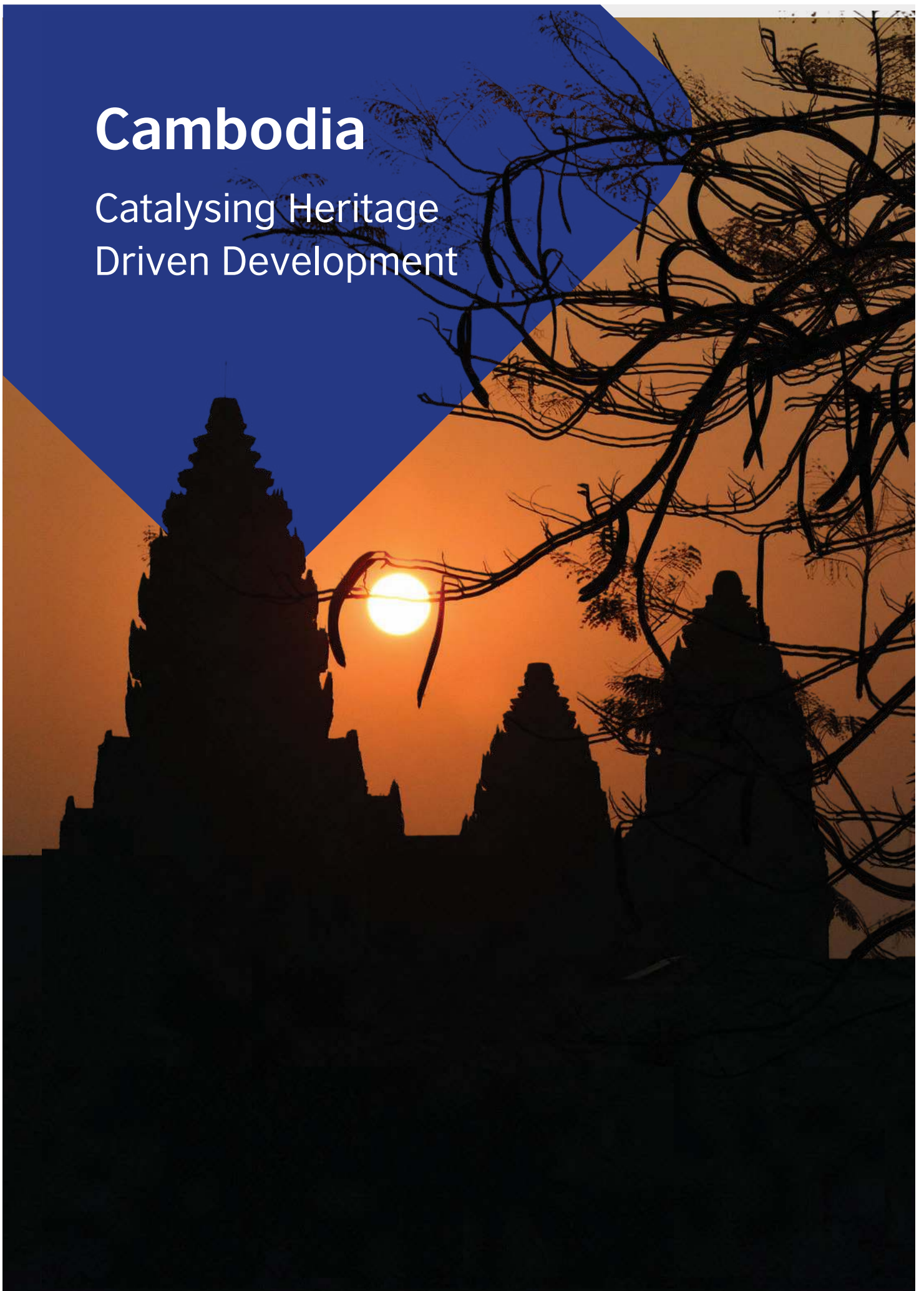
— Syazni Bakar,
Co-Founder of NTFB

- ✓ Opportunity to widen ASEAN exchange – via internships, guest mentors and co-productions.
- ✓ Platform to showcase Bruneian theatre and culture.
- ✓ Strong ambition to grow the festival into a national fixture and regional hub.



Cambodia

Catalysing Heritage
Driven Development



Overview

Cambodia today is a land of rapid change, where a youthful population and a storied past converge to shape a vibrant cultural scene. With just over 17 million people, the country has witnessed steady urban migration—now, more than two in five Cambodians live in towns and cities—while households across rural plains and mountain fringes retain close-knit traditions. Women make up just over half of the population, and average household sizes of five reflect enduring family bonds. Perhaps most striking is Cambodia’s youthful dynamism: nearly one third of its people are aged between ten and twenty-four, offering extraordinary potential to transform cultural heritage into contemporary creative expression.

Cultural context

Cambodia, home to many World Heritage sites and a country with a promising future, is committed to preserving its traditional culture while embracing creativity and innovation. The nation’s rich cultural fabric is shaped by the Khmer majority and more than 20 ethnic minority groups, as well as a diverse spiritual landscape that includes Buddhism as the dominant faith, alongside Islam, Christianity, and animist traditions.

The Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts (MCFA) serves as a vital intermediary between the Royal Government, the private sector, and cultural practitioners. Through its policies and frameworks, MCFA works closely with both local and international stakeholders to ensure the vitality of traditional culture while creating space for new energies and creative expressions to thrive. One of the notable developments in Cambodia’s economy is the growing recognition of the importance of the creative industries. The MCFA has placed a strong emphasis on culture-based creative industries (CCIs), which harness the power and dynamism of culture while remaining faithful to traditional Cambodian skills and knowledge.

In 2023, the newly elected Royal Government of Cambodia introduced a new strategic plan that placed significant emphasis on arts and culture, recognizing both their identity and economic value. Clear definitions of roles, skills, and professions within the sector were discussed and identified. Through strategic cooperation, investment in artists, cultural infrastructure, and support systems, Cambodia positions its CCIs at the heart of its sustainable development agenda. In doing so, the country is building a dynamic market for original, innovative, and sustainable cultural products that are valued and respected globally.

As a result of this growing recognition, 2024 saw increased engagement from local businesses, enterprises, individual artists, cultural practitioners, and associations. One notable example is the Creative Industries of Cambodia Association for Development and Advocacy (CICADA), which has played an active role in promoting Cambodia’s cultural and creative industries (CCIs). This heightened involvement marks a crucial first step toward formal recognition and the broader development of the sector, generating renewed momentum for the growth of CCIs across the country.

In June 2025, MCFA and UNESCO co-hosted a national policy workshop—“Shaping the Future: Towards a National Policy for Cambodia’s Cultural and Creative Industries”—as part of Cambodia’s participation in the ASEAN-UK ACE Programme’s Hybrid Policy Training. The workshop brought together government, civil society, and private sector stakeholders to explore key policy priorities, engagement strategies, and implementation pathways.

Festival landscape

Cambodia's festival scene remains largely concentrated in its urban centres—Phnom Penh, Battambang, and Siem Reap—where age-old ceremonies coexist with a growing contemporary arts sector. This vibrant mix is supported by a rich cultural heritage, a youthful population, and an emerging creative economy. National celebrations such as Khmer New Year and the Water Festival draw large crowds to heritage sites, while the recent rise of pop concerts and contemporary dance performances in Phnom Penh reflects a diversifying cultural offering. Beyond these urban hubs, year-round community-based festivals continue at the grassroots level across the country. Some are deeply rooted in local ritual traditions, while others are tied to religious practices— together reflecting the richness, diversity, and resilience of Cambodia's cultural identity.

While a dedicated national music festival has yet to materialize, private promoters occasionally bring international artists to Cambodia, injecting fresh energy into the country's cultural calendar. These events are typically supported through in-kind support from the Ministry, supplemented by corporate sponsorships and volunteer contributions.

High-profile gatherings like the Cambodia Book Fair clearly demonstrate public enthusiasm, even if formal impact evaluations are not yet standard practice. With the introduction of multi-year funding schemes, strengthened policy coordination and targeted training in festival management, Cambodia's festival landscape is well placed for sustained, inclusive growth.

We aim to create a festival that not only entertains but also educates and inspires meaningful change within the community and beyond, and not only impactful locally but also resonates on a global scale, inspiring social change through the arts.

— Sinath SOUS, Festival Director of Art and Environment Festival

Funding dynamics

As an enabler, the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts (MCFA) is committed to creating opportunities for both the private sector and independent artists to promote their work and expand the reach of their projects through all available means. However, funding remains a perennial challenge. While national budgets and tourism levies help sustain major events in urban centers—and contribute to the continuation of some community-based festivals—most contemporary events still rely heavily on private sponsorships and ticket sales. The Khmer Literature Festival, for example, secures only around ten percent of its funding from government sources, with the remainder supported by corporate partnerships and community-driven micro-donations.

Skills development initiatives

Skill development initiatives and capacity building projects are shared responsibilities between non-governmental organisations, individual artists and the government.

- The Royal University of Fine Arts offers a wide range of programs covering both the practical and theoretical aspects of art and culture. Essential skills such as arts management (short-course) and technical theatre are also taught as part of the curriculum.
- The Khmer Literature Festival regularly offers a two-hour creative-writing workshop within its three-day programme, introducing emerging authors to both craft and community.
- Recognising a gap in curatorial expertise, Cambodian Living Arts launched a Curatorial Fellowship to train future festival curators, though the scheme ran only once and awaits renewal.
- The Photo Phnom Penh Festival and NormadiX Art Tour have introduced aspiring photographers and visual-arts enthusiasts to practical workshops in photography and drawing, respectively.

Despite these positive steps, a consistently structured pathway for festival-management training remains absent. Aspiring organisers must still learn on the job—mobilising social media for promotion, negotiating sponsorships without formal guidance, and relying on ad hoc technical support from peers.

To capitalise on Cambodia's youthful energy, a strategic investment in accredited festival-management curricula, ongoing professional-development workshops and regional exchange programmes would be invaluable. Partnerships with established festival hubs in Thailand and Viet Nam could further enrich local capacities, introducing best practices in areas from sound and lighting engineering to audience research and fundraising strategies.

Local skills needs and impact

Cambodia's festival sector remains constrained by a shortage of essential management competencies—particularly in technical production (sound, lighting and staging), strategic marketing, audience development, and event coordination—underscoring the need for a clear long-term vision and dedicated investment in capacity building. By forging partnerships with regional peers through exchange visits, joint workshops and mentoring programmes, established festival directors and emerging organisers can acquire proven methodologies and practical expertise. As the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts finalises its Creative Industries roadmap, there exists a timely opportunity to embed comprehensive festival-management training within its strategic framework, underpinned by sustained financial commitments to ensure these programmes mature and endure.

Festivals as Protectors of Cultural Heritage

Chapei Dang Veng is a centuries-old Cambodian lute tradition that blends music, storytelling and social commentary. Inscribed by UNESCO in 2016, it safeguards rituals, transmits Khmer language and religious lore, and fosters community cohesion across generations.

The art form nearly vanished under the Khmer Rouge, leaving few grandmasters—most famously Kong Nai and Prach Chhuon. From 2003 to 2012, Pich Sarath apprenticed under Kong Nai before founding the Community of Living Chapei in 2013, and later launching the annual Chapei Dang Veng Festival.

“I and several other performers realised that there was no central organisation for chapei players to exchange information, plan performances or teach students. The idea was to support the artists as well as fans of the art form” — Pich Sarath, Festival Director of Chapei Dang Veng Festival

This event unites performers and audiences to ensure the tradition’s survival, relevance and vibrancy into the future.

“Each person who plays becomes part of an unbroken chain of a uniquely Khmer experience that stretches back to the time of our ancient ancestors” — Pich Sarath, Festival Director of Chapei Dang Veng Festival.

International collaboration potential

Although cross-border partnerships remain relatively rare in Cambodia’s festival landscape, a number of events have begun to demonstrate what is possible when local organisers reach beyond national boundaries.

For instance, in 2024, the Tini Tinou International Circus Festival welcomed performers from around twelve countries across Asia and Europe, showcasing the appeal of Cambodian creative platforms to a diverse array of artists. The Cambodia International Film Festival similarly collaborates with film industries worldwide and, in some years, adopts a “country highlight” format that brings curated programmes from abroad to Cambodian audiences. The Khmer Literature Festival has engaged authors and translators

from Australia, the United States, Japan, the Cambodian American diaspora, Myanmar and Indonesia, while the Arts and Environment Festival features contributions from Mekong- region artists.

Building on these pioneering exchanges, Cambodia’s cultural organisations are keen to pursue formal memoranda of understanding, artist-in-residence schemes and co- commissioned projects— mechanisms that would deepen skills sharing, open new funding streams and position Cambodian festivals more firmly on the regional and global stage.

Survey Headlines



Festivals emphasise local identity, creative-industry growth, jobs, social cohesion and sustainability.



Key skills needs include business planning, leadership effectiveness, and HR/team-capacity building.



Strategic priorities include new artistic models, innovative operations, and stronger international networks.



Funding is fragmented and mainly sponsor- or self-driven

Festivals to Watch

Largely concentrated in urban areas, festivals in Cambodia often combine tradition and contemporary artforms. Below are a few prominent festivals. While this list showcases selected examples, it is by no means exhaustive and does not capture the full breadth of Cambodia's cultural calendar and festivals landscape.

Khmer Literature Festival

A three-day annual gathering rotating among provinces since 2019, this festival provides a platform for writers, publishers and cultural workers to exchange practice, revive rare literary forms and nurture Cambodia's book market.

Tini Tinou International Circus Festival

Founded in 2012 in Battambang and staged every even-year, Tini Tinou showcases ASEAN and Cambodian circus troupes through performances, workshops and street parades to build capacity and position Cambodia on the global circus map.

Chumnor Art

A three-day marketplace in Battambang (est. 2021) that supports local artists across craft, visual arts, theatre and music, aiming to grow into Asia's leading creative marketplace.

Angkor Photo Festival & Workshops

Since 2005, this week-long Siem Reap event has offered affordable masterclasses, daily exhibitions and portfolio reviews to strengthen photographers' skills and regional networks.

Chaktomuk Short Film Festival

An annual Phnom Penh showcase (est. 2013) and awards competition that bridges Cambodian storytellers with international jurors, fostering professional standards and cross-cultural dialogue.

Cambodia International Film Festival (CIFF)

Launched in 2014 under Bophana Centre, CIFF curates a week of world, regional and Khmer cinema screenings, panels and masterclasses to inspire social engagement through film.

National Reading Day

Held each August by the Ministry of Education (as part of the Cambodia Book Fair), this week-long festival promotes literacy through author talks, fairs and competitions across Phnom Penh.

Cambodia Book Fair

An annual October fair since 2012 featuring 100+ publishers, workshops and storytelling sessions to boost Cambodia's publishing ecosystem.

Cambodia Library Festival

A nationwide June initiative celebrating public libraries with open-house events, mobile book vans and community-led reading circles (organised by the National Library).

National Short Film Festival

A biennial competition spotlighting Khmer shorts under 30 minutes, complete with awards, workshops and touring screenings (run by the Cambodian National Film Centre).

Chapei Dang Veng Festival

A three-day July celebration of the UNESCO-recognised Chapei Dang Veng tradition, combining performances, masterclasses and youth outreach to preserve this epic sung storytelling art.

BonnPhum Village Festival

Since 2014, Phnom Penh's largest folklife festival fuses art, music, film and street theatre into a week-long immersion that engages 50 000+ attendees annually.

Golden (R) Age Performing Arts Festival

A biennial showcase in Siem Reap dedicated to veteran artists over 60, featuring dance, music and theatre reflecting on heritage and inter-generational exchange.



Angkor Photo Festival Exhibition, Irene Yap

Case study

Angkor Photo Festival & Workshops

Facebook: facebook.com/AngkorPhotoFestival/

Instagram: [@angkorphotofest](https://www.instagram.com/angkorphotofest)



- ✓ Example of a temple-town heritage transformed into a dynamic cultural hub.
- ✓ Skill development and professional networking - through structured masterclasses and one-to-one mentorship.
- ✓ Network effect catalyst - one-to-one mentorship and peer critique to forge durable cross-border creative communities.

The Angkor Photo Festival & Workshops (APFW) has, since 2005, grown into a respected biennial gathering of photographers, curators and visual storytellers. Situated amid the ancient temples of Angkor, the festival combines intensive professional workshops with city-wide exhibitions and screenings, creating a unique environment where creativity, cultural heritage and community engagement intersect. APFW is organised by the Angkor Photo Association, a non-profit dedicated to mentoring emerging talent across Asia and promoting dialogue through the lens of contemporary photography.

Siem Reap's evolution from a historic temple town to regional cultural hub provides an inspiring backdrop. While the city benefits economically from tourism, local creative industries remain underdeveloped. APFW seeks to bridge this gap by offering affordable, high-quality training alongside public programmes to engage residents and international visitors alike.

Each edition's programme is divided into two linked strands. First, the Workshops, a series of five-day intensives led by experienced photographers covering documentary practice, multimedia storytelling and portfolio development. These sessions foster one-on-one mentorship and peer feedback, equipping emerging practitioners with practical skills and professional networks.

“Photography is more than images— it’s a way to explore our shared stories... Here, participants learn from each other, and our community gains new perspectives on its own heritage.”

— Chenda Sok, Festival Director of Angkor Photo Festival and Workshops

Second, the Festival, which features seven simultaneous exhibitions in cafés, galleries and public squares across Siem Reap; nightly projection screenings; and panel discussions on topics like “Photography and Social Change” or “Digital Innovation in Visual Media.” In 2025, approximately 60 photographers from 19 countries presented work ranging from environmental reportage to portraiture of Cambodia’s multicultural communities.

Financially, APFW operates on a lean, collaborative model. Principal patrons supply core funding, while local hotels and cafés sponsor individual exhibitions in exchange for increased foot traffic and promotional visibility. In-kind support from the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts—such as venue permissions and inclusion in national travel materials—further strengthens the festival’s reach. This approach keeps participation fees low, ensuring that talented photographers with limited budgets can take part.

The festival’s economic and social impact extends beyond its ten days. Boutique guesthouses report a 20 % rise in occupancy during APFW, and participating venues see evening visitor numbers climb by 15–25 %. Free public screenings and portfolio review sessions for local students have sparked growing interest in photography as both art and profession.

“APFW gave me my first gallery invitation and the confidence to pursue photography full-time.”

— Mech Sokha, participant at Angkor Photo Festival and Workshops

Looking ahead, organisers aim to deepen the festival’s year-round influence. Plans are underway for satellite workshops in Phnom Penh, an online alumni platform for virtual critiques and portfolio showcases, and formal partnerships with peer events such as Photo Phnom Penh and the Jaipur Photo Festival. By balancing respect for Cambodia’s rich heritage with a forward-looking embrace of new technologies and social issues, the Angkor Photo Festival & Workshops continues to strengthen Siem Reap’s cultural landscape and nurture the next generation of ASEAN visual storytellers.

- ✓ Opportunity to achieve a Pan-ASEAN - building on cross-border networks and creative exchange.
- ✓ Scalable platform strategy: Expanding via digital alumni networks and satellite workshops for year-round engagement.
- ✓ A cost-efficient, partnership-driven funding model.



Indonesia

An Emergent
Festival Superpower



Overview

Indonesia spans a vast archipelago of over 17,000 islands, from Java's urban centres to remote Papuan highlands. Its more than 280 million people represent hundreds of ethnic groups, languages and faiths, driving a creative sector renowned for its vitality. Across the country, local customs meet contemporary innovation in a festival calendar that ranges from village ceremonies to major arts showcases. This lively interplay of tradition and modernity makes Indonesia a vital hub for both domestic and international cultural exchange.

Cultural context

Indonesia's cultural ecosystem is rooted in a diverse array of local traditions that both anchor community identity and drive contemporary innovation. Since the 2017 Cultural Advancement Law, policy has deliberately moved beyond preservation toward mobilising culture as a growth engine—one that can reinforce social cohesion, diversify the economy, and strengthen Indonesia's diplomatic brand.

Until January 2025, strategic stewardship of the festival landscape sat with the integrated Ministry of Tourism & Creative Economy (Kemenparekraf). A cabinet reshuffle then split that entity in two, leaving festivals squarely under the new Ministry of Creative Economy, which now issues event grants, incubation support, and IP-commercialisation schemes.

Programming and heritage integrity are further reinforced by the Ministry of Culture, whose funding lines and diplomatic programmes (for example, its backing of the Bali International Film Festival) position festivals as soft power assets while safeguarding intangible cultural expressions.

In addition, tools such as regional cultural white papers and integrated data platforms are advancing cultural development across the country, while public-private partnerships and creative-economy incentives signal growing Government confidence in the commercial and

diplomatic potential of the Cultural and Creative Industries (CCIs). Festivals are playing an important part of this landscape, with multiple place-based festivals catalysing sector development.

Yet implementation remains uneven: well-resourced urban centres advance quickly, whereas many outlying regions face infrastructure and capacity constraints. This divide is perhaps most visible in the festival arena, where some large-scale events pioneer partnerships, skills-building workshops, and international exchanges, while smaller festivals struggle to secure basic logistical support. Bridging this gap between strategic ambition and on-the-ground reality will be vital for Indonesia to translate its cultural strengths into inclusive growth and sustainable development.

Festival landscape

Festivals across Indonesia are playing a vital role in shaping the country's cultural identity, regional and global standing. Festivals in Indonesia have become vibrant platforms where heritage crafts intersect with digital media and where communal rituals inform sustainability projects. Across the country, they blend traditional customs with contemporary practices, ranging from vibrant religious ceremonies to modern art festivals. The festival scene is particularly concentrated in key clusters—such as Jakarta, Yogyakarta, Bandung, and Bali. But in recent years, there has been a significant push to decentralise festival activities to smaller cities and rural areas. The UNESCO Creative Cities Programme has provided strategic impetus for some cities, with festivals key to achieving Creative City status (e.g. in Ambon and Surakarta).

A key trend is the growing focus on inclusivity. Festivals are becoming more accessible to marginalized communities, such as rural populations, women, and people with disabilities. Notable examples include the International Disability Arts Biennial in Yogyakarta, which provides a platform for artists with disabilities, and the wider trend of festivals adapting their programming to cater to diverse audiences.

Environmental and social issues are also gaining prominence. Festivals like Jakarta Illustration and Creative Arts Festival are integrating sustainability and climate change themes, using arts and culture to raise awareness on global challenges. Similarly, JobFest and others are incorporating discussions around social flexibility and environmental sustainability, reflecting a broader societal shift towards these concerns.

A generational step-change is also apparent in how Indonesia's flagship music and performing-arts festivals engage regionally. The Indonesia Dance Festival, long a showcase of homegrown choreography, now operates as a touring circuit across ASEAN, inviting dance troupes from Thailand, Viet Nam, and the Philippines to develop cross-cultural residencies and shared performances. Similarly, We The Fest in Jakarta has expanded its lineup to include regional headliners-bringing Malaysia's electronic collectives and Thailand's indie bands into direct conversation with Indonesian audiences.

There is also a rise in grassroots, community-driven festivals in smaller regions, often with minimal budgets but strong local engagement. These festivals, such as those organized by the Muara Suara collective in Borneo, serve both as artistic expressions and tools for community-building and addressing local issues, including environmental degradation.

Overall, the festival landscape in Indonesia is shifting towards greater inclusion, sustainability, and regional diversity, with both government and independent sectors contributing to this evolution. The focus is not only on artistic expression but also on addressing social, environmental, and technological challenges, creating a vibrant and dynamic festival culture across the country.

Funding dynamics

Festival funding in Indonesia remains a blend of public and private sources, though the landscape is evolving. Government support, especially through the recently established Ministry of Creative Economy, is becoming more inclusive, extending to smaller cities and rural areas. Local government funding is often augmented by private sponsorship, and international partners such as the British Council play a pivotal role in supporting initiatives.

While large festivals in cities like Jakarta can access substantial funding, smaller, grassroots events often rely on community involvement, volunteerism, and local business support. These festivals, while modest in scope, have managed to create a significant impact by integrating with local businesses and fostering community engagement.

Skills development initiatives

There's clear recognition of a need for training and knowledge exchange, especially in second- and third-tier cities in the Indonesian festival ecosystem. In response, a growing number of initiatives are embedding skills development into cultural practice. Koalisi Seni is taking a leading role by mapping green practices in the music sector and exploring partnerships with UK institutions, signalling an ambition to build structured expertise in sustainability. Festivals themselves are also stepping into this development space. The Suara Music and Arts Festival in Bali, for example, integrates talks and CCI panels into its programme, offering emerging artists exposure to regional and international thought leaders. Similarly, the Makassar

"Building sustainable film exchange across Southeast Asia requires phased collaboration, as regulatory frameworks and funding mechanisms differ significantly by country."

— Gayatri, Jakarta Film Week

“Operational management—especially project management—is a major challenge. We need training in press-release writing, communications, and proper archiving.”

— Benny Widyo, Director of Kala Jala Collective (East Java)

International Writers’ Festival provides a platform for young writers from Eastern Indonesia to build confidence, network, and hone their craft through workshops and informal learning.

Meanwhile, community-based and experimental spaces are playing a complementary role across Indonesia. Krapela, an open-modular venue in Jakarta, functions as a bar, performance space, and creative hub, creating room for artistic experimentation and peer-to-peer knowledge exchange.

Yet despite these promising developments across the Indonesian festival landscape, efforts remain largely fragmented and urban-centric. Without greater coordination, investment, and support for decentralised delivery models, Indonesia risks missing the opportunity to build an inclusive and sustainable skills development infrastructure across its diverse creative landscape.

Local skills needs and impact

As Indonesia’s festival sector expands, the demand for skills development is becoming more urgent and complex. Festival organisers across the country, particularly in smaller cities and rural areas, frequently point to the shortage of skilled personnel as a core challenge. While there is a vibrant pool of artists and cultural practitioners, many lack the management and operational skills needed to sustain and scale their work.

Key gaps include project and business management, proposal writing, funding applications, and communications. More specialised needs—such as curatorial practice, branding, archiving, and digital engagement—are also emerging as festivals evolve in scope and

ambition. As the sector embraces digital transformation, training in areas like tech integration, XR, AI, coding for music, data analytics, and digital marketing is increasingly essential. Additionally, there is growing interest in green and sustainable practices and a need for greater awareness of the social and environmental impacts of cultural programming.

These skills priorities are particularly acute outside Java and Bali, where access to training opportunities remains limited. In Indonesia, there is a need to match the creative energy of its festivals with the capacity needed to sustain and grow them.

Jogja Festivals (in Yogyakarta) is the most compelling example of how festival capacity can be boosted through long-term, coordinated approaches to skills and capacity-building, partnership, funding and overall festival development. Jogja Festivals was set up to provide the umbrella organisation for the multiple festivals and events in this south-central Javanese city. It hosts a festival directory and symposia, facilitates knowledge exchange and coordinates training and capacity building. This includes a successful partnership with the British Council, which is investing in a new programme of festival training and capacity-building across Indonesia and ASEAN, based on a partnership with Jogja Festivals and Edinburgh Napier University.

International collaboration potential

Indonesia’s festival scene is increasingly engaging with the broader Southeast Asian and global cultural ecosystems. Festivals are starting to collaborate regionally, with dance and music festivals exploring cross-border touring opportunities. The growth of platforms like Jobfest and initiatives supported by Koalisi Seni is indicative of the sector’s readiness to tackle global issues like climate change through culture. Additionally, the Jakarta Illustration and Creative Arts Festival provides a model for market-facing festivals that connect local creators with global buyers.

In the coming years, Indonesia's festival landscape could benefit from stronger institutional support, targeted professional development, and more sustainable funding mechanisms. By investing in skills development and fostering international partnerships, Indonesia has the potential to establish itself as a leading hub for cultural exchange and innovation in Southeast Asia.

Survey Headlines



Festivals span arts, cinema, and community-driven programming.



Key skills needs centre on business planning, leadership, HR capacity-building and branding.



Strategic priorities are new artistic models, innovative operations and broader international networks.



Funding remains patchy, blending private sponsorship and self-income with uneven public support.

1—15 September 2024

Afa Ada Grosera

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di beberapa
ruang publik
di Tulungagung

KALAJALA

Case study

KALAJALA Festival

Facebook: facebook.com/gulungtukarta

Instagram: [@gulung.tukar](https://instagram.com/gulung.tukar)

- ✓ Example of a festival that bridges environmental sustainability with the arts.
- ✓ Diverse ecosystem - engages artists, researchers & communities with government, academia and NGOs.
- ✓ Operational Sustainability - Zero-waste, rainwater-powered events leveraging volunteer and in-kind resources.

The KALAJALA Festival, held in Tulungagung, East Java, is organized by the local multidisciplinary arts collective Gulung Tukar, in partnership with the regional Department of Culture, Institut Seni Indonesia (Surakarta), the East Java Water Authority, and several community cooperatives. Its name-combining the Sanskrit words Kala ("time") and Jala ("water")-evokes the twin forces of temporal flow and the life-giving power of water that has shaped Tulungagung's transformation from swamp to city.

KALAJALA is conceived as a trilogy, with each edition exploring a different facet of water's cultural significance. The first, KALAJALA: Seeing Water at Work (2024), highlights water's essential role in daily life and memory. The second, KALAJALA: Creating Waves Together (2025), will explore waves as symbols of change. The final edition, KALAJALA: Navigating Our Rivers (2026), will focus on local rivers and their cultural, ecological, and historical importance, marking the festival's transition into the Mataraman Triennale.

In its inaugural edition, *Melihat Air Bekerja* ("Seeing Water at Work") in 2024, KALAJALA focused on water as a "living archive" - a vital element that sustains life and holds cultural, historical, and ecological significance. The festival's programming includes visual arts, new media, performances, workshops, and public programmes

that explore the influence of water on memory, identity, and daily life in a city that evolved from a vast swamp into a vibrant urban centre. Site-specific installations have included a floating pavilion on the Brantas Canal by the collective *Arsip Air*, which projected archival photographs of colonial-era irrigation onto rippling water. Sound artist Dwi Hartanto led a data-sonification workshop, turning over a century's worth of rainfall and river-level records into immersive soundscapes. Meanwhile, teenage volunteers have conducted oral-history interviews along the Kali Tumpang, co-designing an interactive digital map that documents rice-paddy flooding stories passed down by elders. Public programmes have included a documentary series on Javanese qanat systems-complete with Q&As led by hydrologist Dr. Rini Susanti; and a children's storywalk featuring illustrated tales of the Naga River spirit, fostering eco-awareness among young participants.

“Our ambition is for the Kala Jala Festival to evolve into a decentralised, sustainability-driven platform that cultivates collaboration and ecological stewardship through artist residencies and co-curated programmes.”

— Benny Widyo, Producer of KALAJALA

In 2025, Creating Waves Together invites artists and scientists to explore the metaphor of the wave as catalyst and connector. Programming includes kinetic sculptures, AR installations, and performance pieces that embody movement and transformation. A signature hackathon will pair climate researchers with local designers to prototype community-driven flood-early-warning apps, reinforcing KALAJALA’s commitment to practice-based ecological solutions.

The 2026 edition, Navigating Our Rivers, marks KALAJALA’s evolution into the Mataraman Triennale. Programming highlights will include a floating symposium—held on a barge-stage drifting along the Brantas—where policymakers, artists, and water-rights advocates debate river governance. A new network of year-round “Water Cells” residencies in Malang, Yogyakarta, and Bali will support long-term studio research, while the launch of JalaHub.org, an open-access multilingual archive, will preserve fieldwork, artworks, and educational materials for global audiences.

The KALAJALA festival fosters interdisciplinary collaboration, providing a space for artists, researchers, and cultural practitioners to connect with Tulungagung’s local narratives. By its first year, KALAJALA engaged over 50 artists, 30 researchers, and 200 community participants. Partnerships with the Netherlands’ Water Dreams network and Australia’s BlueField

Initiative have positioned Tulungagung amid international sustainability conversations. With zero-waste event protocols, rain-harvest lighting systems, and policy briefs delivered to the East Java Water Authority, KALAJALA models ecological responsibility. By engaging in these diverse artistic expressions, KALAJALA encourages deeper reflections on how water shapes communities, cultures, and ecosystems, linking these local stories to global conversations about sustainability and environmental consciousness.

Looking to the future, KALAJALA plans to evolve into a decentralised platform, focusing on long-term initiatives such as residencies, research cells, and co-curated programs across different locations. Digital tools will be integrated to enhance accessibility and ensure continuity, supporting the festival’s sustainability and broadening its impact. Through its commitment to collaboration, creativity, and ecological awareness, KALAJALA aims to build a sustainable arts ecosystem in Tulungagung. With its vision for long-term growth and increased global visibility, KALAJALA is poised to become a key cultural event in Indonesia and a platform for ongoing dialogue on ecological sustainability in the arts.

- ✓ Opportunity to establish international collaborations through global art-eco partnerships.
- ✓ Ambition to evolve into a decentralized multi-hub festival model.
- ✓ Plans to use digital platforms for global outreach, launching JalaHub.org and virtual workshops.



Case study

Makassar International Writers' Festival (MIWF)

Facebook: facebook.com/makassarwriters/

Instagram: [@makassarwriters](https://www.instagram.com/makassarwriters)

- ✓ Example of a festival decentralising literary culture – transforming Makassar into a recognised cultural- tourism hub.
- ✓ Interdisciplinary creative incubator - integrates visual art, music, performance and socio-environmental advocacy.
- ✓ Inclusive platform for emerging voices – empowering women and young writers with public exposure and professional development.

The Makassar International Writers' Festival (MIWF) is an annual grassroots event held in Makassar, South Sulawesi, Indonesia. The festival celebrates local literary traditions and provides a platform for Indonesian, particularly Eastern Indonesian, writers to engage in discussions on contemporary issues. Hosted over four days at the historic Fort Rotterdam, MIWF blends cultural heritage with modern artistic expression. Organised by Rumata' Artspace, an independent cultural facility in the city of Makassar, the festival aims to promote the city as an important hub in arts, culture and literature at the regional and global level.

MIWF focuses on local authors and issues relevant to Indonesia, offering a community-driven approach. It contrasts with commercialised international literary festivals by highlighting the works of emerging and established Indonesian writers. The festival is organized by 130 young volunteers, mainly university students, contributing to its dynamic and youthful energy.

Makassar, historically a key trade hub, is home to the Bugis people, renowned for their oral traditions. The epic La Galigo, one of the longest literary works globally, anchors much of MIWF's programming, incorporating themes that connect Makassar's past with contemporary literary discussions. The festival also addresses critical issues like social justice, cultural preservation, and climate change.

"The knowledge that Indigenous women possess is crucial for the survival of their communities. They play an active role in fishing and deeply understand the crop cycle. Balancing their domestic roles while being key actors in maintaining community livelihoods, Indigenous women are reliable and important news sources for me as a journalist."

— Nopri Ismi, a Pulitzer Center Rainforest Journalism Fund grantee and MIWF participant

In 2024, MIWF's theme "M/othering" focused on the intersection of gender, care work, and environmental justice, highlighting the role of Indigenous women and marginalized groups affected by extractive industries. This theme underscored the importance of women's voices in environmental advocacy and broader societal change.

A key collaboration for MIWF in 2024 was with the Pulitzer Center, which led to the "Window to Indigenous Women" exhibition. This exhibition showcased the struggles of women from the Musi River region in South Sumatra, emphasizing the gendered impacts of climate change and environmental degradation caused by industrial activities. The documentary featured in the exhibition highlighted the resilience of these women in advocating for their communities and preserving their environment.

MIWF's focus on fostering cultural exchange and international collaboration was further highlighted when Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison attended the 2022 festival. His visit, as part of a cultural exchange initiative, brought significant attention to Makassar and the festival, reinforcing its role as a cultural bridge between Indonesia and Australia.

Through MIWF, Makassar has become an important hub for the exchange of literary ideas. The festival has expanded its role in cultural tourism, attracting visitors from across Indonesia and beyond. It also serves as a platform for young writers to showcase their talents, with past participants offering fresh perspectives on social and environmental issues.

Despite challenges such as funding and the logistics of organising a large-scale event, MIWF has remained resilient. It has diversified its funding model, relying on ticket sales, sponsorships, and partnerships with local and international organizations, ensuring accessibility and sustainable growth.

Looking ahead, MIWF plans to develop educational programs and year-round initiatives to further support local and regional writers. With its commitment to community engagement and cultural exchange, the festival is set to continue as a key cultural event in Indonesia's literary landscape.

- ✓ Opportunity to forge regional literary collaborations – developing exchange programmes and co-curated events with ASEAN writers' festivals and cultural centres.
- ✓ Ambition to position Makassar as a cultural hub - driving regional cultural development and tourism, and serving as a gateway to Eastern Indonesia.
- ✓ Inclusive capacity-building framework – residencies, Art Club, workshops and mentorships empower diverse talent.

Festivals to Watch

Indonesia's festival landscape is a dynamic mix of traditional, contemporary, and market-facing events, drawing from its rich cultural heritage while embracing global trends in sustainability, technology, and the arts. Below are some standout festivals across various sectors. While this list showcases selected examples, it is by no means exhaustive and does not capture the full breadth of Indonesia's cultural calendar and festival landscape.

Sunset di Kebun

A new trend in the Indonesian festival scene, Sunset di Kebun combines music with a picnic experience in lush botanical parks. Focused on environmental awareness, the festival collaborates with waste management partners like Buangdisini to promote sustainability.

Suara Music and Arts Festival

Held annually in Bali, Suara Festival merges music, art installations, and culinary experiences across multiple stages. The festival attracts international and regional artists, with performances from acts like Angus & Julia Stone and Yung Raja, along with discussions and wellness sessions.

Jogja-NETPAC Asian Film Festival (JAFF)

Held each November–December in Yogyakarta, JAFF (Jogja-NETPAC Asian Film Festival) celebrates contemporary Asian cinema with a focus on networking and market development. The festival screens over 180 features, shorts, and documentaries from across Asia and the Pacific, while hosting industry panels, masterclasses, and the inaugural JAFF Market to foster collaboration between filmmakers, distributors, and cultural institutions.

Jakarta World Cinema

An annual event showcasing 120 films from 61 countries, Jakarta World Cinema is one of the largest international film festivals in Southeast Asia. It brings diverse global cinema to Indonesian audiences while promoting local film culture.

Makassar International Writers Festival

This festival connects writers from across Indonesia, especially the underrepresented eastern regions, with global audiences. It focuses on indigenous and women's narratives, with themes like climate change playing a central role. Jakarta Illustration and Creative Arts Fair
This fair provides a space for illustrators and artists to showcase and sell their work. A key feature is the emphasis on creating new characters from local folk tales and collaborating regionally to foster cross-border artistic exchange.

Indonesian Dance Festival

A longstanding festival that has been a hub for regional touring, featuring performances from Southeast Asia and the broader global dance community. This festival has consistently promoted the exchange of dance traditions across borders.

Bali Arts Festival

Celebrating the island's artistic diversity, the Bali Arts Festival showcases traditional Balinese music, dance, and crafts while integrating contemporary performances and international collaborations.

Jobfest

An event that has become a central gathering for the arts and culture sector, Jobfest focuses on the intersection of work, creativity, and sustainability, making it an important event for the country's young professionals.

Bandung Design Biennale

Celebrating Bandung's UNESCO City of Design status, this festival focuses on creative industries, design innovation, and sustainable practices, engaging local artists and designers in workshops, exhibitions, and public talks.

Muara Suara Sound Art Festival

An experimental sound and music event in Borneo, this festival highlights issues like environmental destruction, especially deforestation and mining, through sound installations and performances, raising awareness in a creative context.

Pesta Pinggiran

A community-based festival that celebrates local creativity, sustainability, and cultural exchange in Central Java. Pesta Pinggiran highlights traditional crafts, performances, and grassroots creativity, offering a unique space for emerging artists to showcase their work in unconventional settings.

Artket (Jakarta)

Held annually in Jakarta, Artket is a dynamic creative event that merges art, design, and culture. It brings together local and international artists, designers, and creatives to engage in collaborative projects, workshops, and exhibitions, all aimed at fostering creative innovation and cultural dialogue.

Tenggara Festival

Set in the scenic region of Temanggung, the Tenggara Festival celebrates local art, culture, and environmental sustainability. The festival is held at the eco-friendly Papringan Market, where traditional arts, live music, and organic food offerings create a vibrant, sustainable atmosphere for visitors.

Joyland Festival

A multi-day event blending music, art, and creative experiences, Joyland Festival is one of the most anticipated festivals in Indonesia. The festival, held in various locations across the country, focuses on creativity and sustainable

practices, offering a platform for local and international talents to come together and share their work.

We The Fest

Organized by Ismaya Live, We The Fest is a summer celebration of music, arts, fashion, and food, attracting thousands of attendees each year. The festival features international and local music acts, fashion showcases, culinary experiences, and art installations, making it one of Indonesia's premier cultural events.

Biennale Jatim

An inclusive festival in East Java that celebrates local identities while fostering international dialogue. It brings art closer to underserved communities through exhibitions, workshops, and innovative cultural programs.

Wild Ground Fest

Held annually in Yogyakarta at Wild Ground Park, Wild Ground Festival is a multi-day immersive music and arts gathering set against the region's lush mountain backdrop. The festival features live performances across multiple stages, interactive art installations, eco-conscious workshops on permaculture and sustainability, wellness sessions, and communal camping under the stars. By integrating local communities and environmental education, Wild Ground offers a holistic creative experience that celebrates nature, culture, and artistic innovation.

International Kelola Art Festival

Held annually in Yogyakarta and organized by the Prodi Tata Kelola Seni at Institut Seni Indonesia, the International Kelola Art Festival brings together emerging artists, art managers, and scholars to explore contemporary art management practices. The festival features gallery exhibitions, panel discussions, and hands-on workshops on curatorial strategies, cultural policy, and arts entrepreneurship, fostering cross-cultural exchange and professional development within Indonesia's creative sector.

Minikino Film Week

A pioneering short film festival held in Bali, Minikino Film Week promotes film literacy and community engagement. It focuses on short films from around the world, with a strong emphasis on local talent and educational outreach to inspire the next generation of filmmakers.

Festival Film Dokumenter (FFD)

Held annually in Yogyakarta, the Festival Film Dokumenter is a key event in Indonesia's documentary film scene. The festival is dedicated to showcasing alternative cinema that educates and raises awareness about social issues, with workshops and exhibitions complementing the screenings.

Lao PDR

Culture on the rise



Overview

The only landlocked country in South-East Asia, Laos is home to just over 7 million people spread across mountainous terrain and a largely rural territory. The Mekong River shapes much of the country's geography and connectivity, linking its major towns-Vientiane, Luang Prabang, and Pakse-and anchoring cultural life in riverside communities. Over two-thirds of the population lives in rural areas, and more than half are under the age of 25, reflecting a young demographic with long-term potential for cultural and creative participation.

Cultural context

Laos has a culturally rich society shaped by Theravāda Buddhist traditions and a mosaic of ethnic heritage. Religious festivals, oral traditions, and craft practices continue to shape daily life, particularly in rural areas where access to formal cultural infrastructure remains limited.

In policy terms, culture in Laos has traditionally been understood in heritage and nation-building terms, with emphasis placed on preservation, transmission, and national identity. While cultural institutions are present at both central and provincial levels, policy frameworks related to the cultural and creative industries (CCIs) remain limited in scope and ambition. Culture and creativity are yet to be fully recognised as drivers of economic or social development, and formal support for contemporary artistic practice, digital creativity, or cultural entrepreneurship is still nascent.

"Laos is not traditionally seen as a cultural hub within Southeast Asia. However, there are noticeable signs of change and development in the cultural sector."

- A Cultural Stakeholder.

Nonetheless, there are signs of quiet growth and experimentation across the CCIs. A small number of independent initiatives-particularly in visual arts, design, performing arts, and film-have emerged in urban centres like Vientiane and Luang Prabang. These often operate outside formal policy frameworks, supported instead by networks of artists, returned diaspora, NGOs, and foreign cultural institutions. In the absence of purpose-built infrastructure, cafés, heritage houses, bookshops, and multi-use community spaces have taken on a key role as informal creative hubs. Some galleries and studios also host exhibitions, workshops, and artist talks, contributing to a growing-if still fragile-ecosystem of contemporary cultural production.

While capacity constraints and regulatory ambiguity remain challenges, these grassroots and hybrid spaces reflect a broader shift in cultural participation.

Spotlight: Creative Hubs in Action - Anchoring Culture Through Space

Across Laos, a modest network of hybrid venues and community-driven spaces is helping to shape the country's evolving creative landscape. In the absence of large-scale cultural infrastructure, these places offer vital platforms for artistic production, exchange, and public engagement:

- Heuan Chan Heritage House (Luang Prabang): One of the last surviving pre-colonial homes in the city, this heritage venue regularly hosts arts talks, screenings, and pop-up markets.
- Ock Pop Tok Living Crafts Centre (Luang Prabang): A textile “living museum” and café on the banks of the Mekong, supporting artisan residencies, workshops, and traditional weaving showcases.
- Social Impact Hub (Vientiane): A convening space for social entrepreneurs, creatives, and changemakers, offering workshops, training, and community events.
- STELLA (Vientiane): A youth-focused social enterprise hub supporting early-stage initiatives with incubation pods, small grants, and peer learning.
- Lao Art Week Pop-Ups: A biennial initiative that activates public spaces and galleries, connecting emerging artists with broader audiences through temporary visual arts exhibitions.
- The Pottery Village, Ban Xieng Lek: A working riverside village where 300 artisans produce ceramics using centuries-old wood-fired kilns. Hands-on workshops provide cultural continuity and public engagement.

These hubs, though diverse in form and function, share a common role: bridging heritage and innovation while expanding access to creative expression.



Festival landscape

The cultural and festival landscape of Laos is shaped by its rich heritage, ethnic diversity, and a growing- though still nascent creative scene. Traditional religious and seasonal festivals remain an integral part of cultural life and tourism, while a small but resilient network of independent festivals has emerged over the past decade. These newer initiatives offer valuable insight into the country's evolving cultural identity, contemporary artistic practices, and structural challenges. They provide rare platforms for local creativity and are increasingly relevant in shaping cultural participation.

These festivals often operate at the intersection of contemporary art, film, performance, and community practice. While small in number, they reveal the presence of a culturally engaged audience, a community of Laotian creatives (both local and returning diaspora), and a network of foreign cultural institutions and expatriate collaborators who contribute artistic input, funding, and / or visibility. These festivals tend to concentrate in Vientiane and Luang Prabang, where access to infrastructure and networks is strongest, and they reflect a hybrid cultural sensibility shaped by regional influences and cross-cultural exchange.

"People are excited when there is something happening, and despite the challenges in organizing festivals, there is growing interest and engagement in cultural activities."

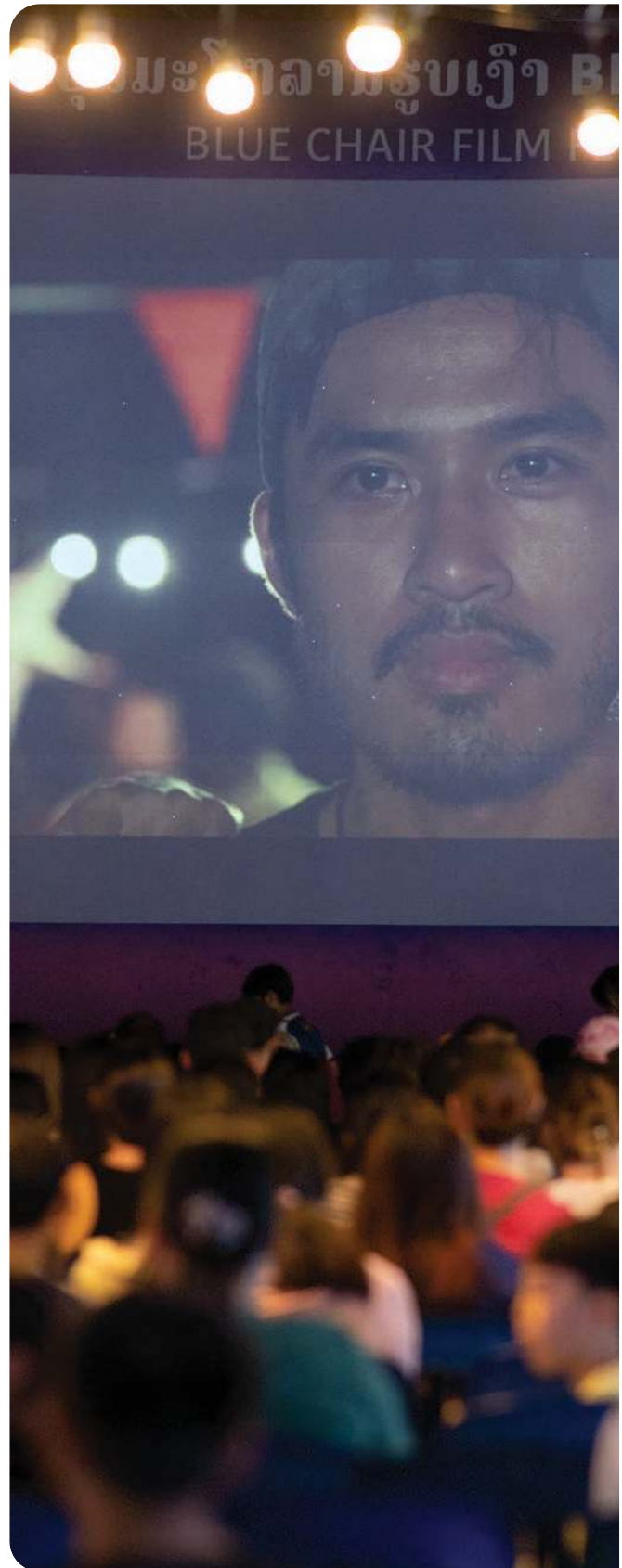
- A Cultural Stakeholder.



Spotlight: Reviving Heritage - The Vientiane Jazz Festival and Its Unique Venue:

The Vientiane Jazz Festival, held in a Soviet-era circus venue, has played a significant role in bringing live music to an iconic heritage site. The venue, with a capacity of 1,100 seats, serves as a unique backdrop for jazz performances, showcasing how festivals can breathe new life into historic spaces and contribute to the city's cultural vitality.

At present, the festival is in a brief hiatus due to funding challenges, but there is anticipation for its future. The festival has previously hosted a mix of local and international talent, and its return is awaited by those who have valued its contribution to Vientiane's cultural scene. Its ability to merge a rich architectural history with contemporary artistic expression makes it a notable example of how cultural events can revive heritage sites while fostering cultural exchange.



Most festivals and events are organised by small, dedicated teams-often artists or cultural workers themselves-who operate on a project basis with limited core support. Their profiles vary, but common features include multidisciplinary programming, experimental formats, and the repurposing of unconventional venues such as heritage houses, craft centres, community hubs, and commercial spaces. While this flexibility has allowed for creativity and inclusivity, it also reflects structural constraints: there are few dedicated cultural venues with appropriate technical capacity, and access to state-owned spaces can be inconsistent or administratively complex.

Spotlight: Living Heritage in Action - Heuan Chan as a Cultural Venue

Housed in one of the last surviving pre-colonial structures in Luang Prabang's historic core, Heuan Chan Heritage House is an active cultural centre and museum. The venue routinely hosts public and private events including traditional dance and music showcases, food and craft festivals, and hands-on workshops. Over the years, it has supported local and international initiatives – from International Coffee Day to regional film festivals – while providing space and logistics for emerging cultural organisers.

A stage added during renovations has allowed for modest live performances, and the site continues to attract a mix of tourists, locals, and school groups. Its central location and flexible setup demonstrate how cultural heritage sites in Laos can be repurposed to engage communities, support small-scale festivals, and introduce young audiences to traditional art forms through experiential learning.

Funding dynamics

Funding remains one of the most pressing challenges. Independent festivals rely primarily on short-term project grants from embassies, international cultural institutes, and NGOs. A handful have benefitted from private sponsorship- Lao Brewery Company, for example, has previously provided financial or in-kind support- but most commercial partnerships remain ad hoc and limited in scope. Ticket revenues, where applicable, are modest, and many events operate free of charge to ensure accessibility. This dependency on external funding creates a fragile ecosystem. The COVID- 19 pandemic sharply exposed these vulnerabilities, forcing several festivals into long- term hiatus and highlighting the absence of financial reserves, core funding, or risk mitigation mechanisms.

"While we manage with a small budget, additional resources would enable us to invite more artists and expand our programming."

- A Cultural Stakeholder.

Skills development initiatives

Despite these challenges, festivals play a valuable role in skills development. Some, like those in the film sector, have integrated workshops or mentoring programmes into their programming- offering rare opportunities for capacity building in curatorial practice, production, and digital storytelling. However, there is no national training programme or institutional pathway for festival management or technical production. Organisers often develop skills on the job, with limited access to peer exchange or professional development. Priority needs include event logistics, technical production (sound, lighting, staging), marketing and communications, fundraising, and audience development.

International collaboration potential

Looking ahead, Laos's geographic positioning and ASEAN membership offer strategic potential for regional integration. Its proximity to key cultural hubs across Southeast Asia makes it well placed to host touring artists or plug into cross-border programming. For audiences and artists alike, Laos is relatively accessible – by air and, in some cases, overland – from Thailand, Viet Nam, and China. Though participation in formal ASEAN festivals and exchanges has been limited so far, there are precedents, and appetite is growing. With stronger mobility schemes and better coordinated regional partnerships, Laos's independent festivals could play a more visible role in Southeast Asia's cultural circuit.

Spotlight: Fang Mae Khong - A Decade of Dance and Dialogue

Founded in 2010, the Fang Mae Khong International Dance Festival is Laos's longest-running contemporary dance festival and one of the few platforms dedicated to movement-based performance. Co-organised by Fang Lao (Laos) and Compagnie Kham (France), the festival brings together dancers and choreographers from across Southeast Asia and beyond, offering space for artistic exchange, regional collaboration, and cultural dialogue.

A distinctive feature of the festival is its community-facing approach. In addition to public performances, it regularly delivers workshops and showcases in schools and community spaces, introducing new audiences to contemporary dance and fostering local participation. Despite limited resources, Fang Mae Khong continues to bridge local and international scenes, creating opportunities for Laotian performers to connect with regional touring circuits and residency programmes.

Survey Headlines



Fusion of traditional and contemporary arts.



Key skills needs are business planning, HR capacity-building and leadership.



Strategic priorities include new artistic models, innovative operations and broader international networks.



Funding is fragmented, with a strong appetite for guidance on international funding and sponsorship models.

Festivals to Watch

Laos' festival landscape is growing, but fragile, blending rich traditions with a developing contemporary arts scene. Below are a few festivals that highlight this evolution. While this list showcases selected examples, it is by no means exhaustive and does not capture the full breadth of Laos' cultural calendar and festival landscape.

Blue Chair Film Festival (Luang Prabang)

An annual December event in the UNESCO World Heritage town of Luang Prabang, this festival showcases Southeast Asian cinema through a curated selection of films from 11 countries, accompanied by workshops and public discussions.

LanXang Shorts

Founded in 2020, this annual short film festival in Vientiane features a competition for Lao filmmakers, along with screenings, talks, and workshops aimed at fostering a vibrant local film community.

European Film Festival

Held annually in May, this festival presents a selection of European films at the French Institute in Vientiane, promoting cultural exchange and strengthening ties between Europe and Laos.

ASEAN Youth Theatre Festival

This biennial festival provides a platform for youth theatre groups across Asia to perform, engage in workshops, and participate in cultural exchanges, fostering regional collaboration in the performing arts.

Lao Fashion Week (Vientiane)

Established in 2014, this premier fashion event in Vientiane showcases the work of Lao and ASEAN designers, promoting local talent and bridging cultural gaps in the fashion industry.

Vangvieng Music Festival

An annual music festival held in the scenic town of Vang Vieng, attracting thousands of attendees with a diverse lineup of local and international

artists, DJs, and bands performing across multiple stages.

Vientiane Jazz Festival

A biennial event that brings together jazz musicians from around the world to perform in Vientiane, blending traditional jazz with local musical influences to create a unique cultural experience.

Lao Art Week

An annual event featuring the works of over 80 artists from Laos and around the world, showcasing a diverse range of artistic expressions including painting, sculpture, and digital art.

Vientiane Performing Arts Festival

A multidisciplinary festival that celebrates the performing arts through a series of performances, workshops, and cultural exchanges, aiming to enhance the local arts scene and promote international collaboration.

Fang Mae Khong International Dance Festival

Held along the Mekong River, this festival brings together dance troupes from across the region to perform traditional and contemporary works, fostering cross-border cultural dialogue.

Fun Mekong Festival (Vientiane & Rural Villages)

A contemporary dance festival that tours various locations in Laos, including rural villages, aiming to make dance accessible to diverse audiences and promote cultural exchange through movement.



Case study

Blue Chair Film Festival

Facebook: facebook.com/bluechair.filmfest/

Instagram: [@bluechair.film](https://instagram.com/bluechair.film)

An open-air screening featuring the iconic blue chairs that gave the Blue Chair Film Festival its name

Photo courtesy of Sean Chadwell

- ✓ Example of a festival that serves as a platform for regional talent development and creative exchange.
- ✓ Fills a cultural infrastructure gap with free, high-impact screenings.
- ✓ Aligns cultural programming with sustainable development and tourism.

Founded in 2009 as the Luang Prabang Film Festival, the Blue Chair Film Festival has emerged as one of Southeast Asia's most distinctive cultural platforms. Held biennially in the UNESCO World Heritage town of Luang Prabang, the festival is named after the iconic blue resin chairs that populate its main outdoor screening venue. These humble seats reflect the festival's ethos: accessible, inclusive, and rooted in local context.

The festival took a pandemic-related hiatus and re-emerged in 2022 under its current name, continuing its mission to democratise access to film. All screenings are free and open to the public, with up to 1,500 audience attending each screening at the main night venue—far exceeding the 800 chairs available. This strong local engagement underscores a growing appetite for film and storytelling across Laos.

Formally registered as a private business, Blue Chair has remained committed to showcasing the diversity and creativity of Southeast Asian cinema. Films from ASEAN countries, including Timor-Leste, are selected by a regional network of Motion Picture Ambassadors, ensuring a broad and representative programme.

Blue Chair places strategic emphasis on inclusivity, cross-cultural dialogue, and professional development - especially for Lao filmmakers. Since its launch in 2013, the Lao Filmmakers Fund has disbursed close to USD 250,000 in microgrants, catalysing a diverse range of local storytelling from environmental documentaries to personal family narratives. The fund is complemented by application workshops that build capacity in project design, budgeting, and narrative articulation, addressing common skill gaps in the local creative ecosystem.

“There’s no cinema infrastructure in northern Laos, so our screenings offer a rare and valuable cultural experience for local audiences.”

— Sean Chadwell, Director of Blue Chair Film Festival

The festival's programme features over 60 curated films, accompanied by public discussions and side events. Screenings take place across three venues:

Luang Prabang Primary School, the main outdoor night venue, accommodating up to 1,200 people per screening.

Heuan Chan Heritage House, a smaller outdoor night venue with a capacity of 200.

Little Lao House, an indoor day venue hosting up to 100 spectators per screening.

The Heuan Chan is a restored pre-colonial structure emblematic of Luang Prabang's heritage. Its provision on a pro bono basis highlights the festival's reputational capital and strong stakeholder relationships within the local cultural ecosystem. In a region without an operating cinema since 1985, these temporary venues provide a rare and valued cinematic experience.

Beyond the main event, Blue Chair conducts year-round activities. These include community screenings in rural provinces such as Phongsaly and Savannakhet, and educational initiatives like Filmmaking 101 and Our Lives on Film. Past collaborations include the MEKONG 2030, an anthology film project, the Love Laos environmental campaign, and youth-focused storytelling competitions. These projects not only amplify underrepresented voices but also support environmental awareness, tourism promotion, and vocational development.

Historically, the festival was largely financed through private sponsorships, with Beer Lao once contributing up to 80% of the budget. The pandemic disrupted this model, prompting a pivot toward embassy and NGO partnerships. Recent editions have been supported by The Asia Foundation, Oxfam, and various diplomatic missions. Although valuable, this funding is often tied to specific activities, creating limitations for organisational growth. Chadwell notes the need for unrestricted funds and year-round staff to sustain and expand the festival's impact.

“Many Lao films disappear after brief runs—they’re rarely accessible beyond the festival circuit, despite their quality.”

— Sean Chadwell, Director of Blue Chair Film Festival

One ambition is to reintroduce the Talent Lab, previously run in partnership with Tribeca Film Institute, which linked Southeast Asian filmmakers with international mentors and co-production opportunities. Plans are also underway to launch a micro-cinema in Luang Prabang and a digital platform to exhibit Lao films to diaspora communities, particularly in the United States. These efforts aim to address the common issue of Lao films disappearing after limited screenings.

The festival's location in Luang Prabang offers strategic advantages: a walkable city, proximity to regional capitals, and a UNESCO-recognised cultural landscape.

However, competition from established festivals in neighbouring countries presents a challenge. To remain relevant, Blue Chair continues to focus on regional distinctiveness, capacity-building, and community-rooted programming.

Despite limited resources, the Blue Chair Film Festival has carved out a vital space for film in Laos. It serves not only as a showcase for ASEAN cinema, but also as an incubator for local talent, a bridge between communities, and a platform for stories that might otherwise remain untold.

“We’re working towards a digital space where global audiences, especially the Lao diaspora, can access Lao films.”

— Sean Chadwell, Director of Blue Chair Film Festival

- ✓ Opportunity to enhance regional relevance by deepening ASEAN-wide collaboration.
- ✓ Ambition to expand local impact through year-round and regional engagement.
- ✓ Heritage location supports long-term positioning in cultural tourism and diplomacy.

Indoor screening at the Blue Chair Film Festival. Photo courtesy of Sean Chadwell.



Malaysia

Creative fusion in motion



Overview

Malaysia is a geographically diverse nation located in the heart of Southeast Asia, comprising Peninsular Malaysia and the states of Sabah and Sarawak on the island of Borneo. With a population of over 32 million, it is home to a richly multicultural society shaped by Malay, Chinese, Indian, and Indigenous communities. This cultural plurality is reflected in daily life, language, religion, and artistic expression. As a regional transport and trade hub with deep historical ties across Asia, Malaysia offers a unique blend of tradition and modernity-providing a strong foundation for cultural production, exchange, and a growing creative economy.

Cultural context

Malaysia's diversity underpins a vibrant creative economy that spans all art forms. The creative economy is increasingly recognised as a strategic sector within Malaysia's broader development agenda. While cultural policy is not fully centralised, national efforts have linked creativity to tourism, digital innovation, youth employment, and place-making. Institutional support has grown through agencies such as MyCreative Ventures, CENDANA, and MDEC, which provide funding, training, and market access across sub-sectors. However, coordination across federal and state levels remains uneven, and implementation often depends on local leadership and initiative.

Kuala Lumpur and the wider Klang Valley operate as the nation's commercial and cultural hub, with significant concentrations of cultural infrastructure and creative enterprise. Subsequently, Kuala Lumpur and neighbouring Selangor have focused on building capacity and driving growth across the Creative Industries, with emphasis on sectors such as fashion and design, digital media, music and film. More

recently, the historic downtown of Kuala Lumpur has been re-imagined as a Creative District, led by the agency Think City.

Outside of the Klang Valley conurbation, States like Penang and Sarawak are emerging as cultural leaders with integrated strategies that connect culture to socio-economic development. Penang has long-operated as a regionally significant cultural hub, with its unique blend of cultures and compelling fusion of art forms and aesthetics - nowhere more evident than George Town, which combines architectural, gastronomic and literary influences from across South East Asia and Europe and beyond.

"In Sarawak, we get together 'on the mat', share ideas, collaborate and identify ways we can connect cultures, protecting heritage and trialling new things"

— Sonia Luhong Wang, Curator at Borneo-Bengkel

In this evolving environment, Malaysia's festivals play a vital role-as spaces where policy meets practice, where cultural identities are explored and performed, and where creative experimentation takes shape in public life.

Festival landscape

Malaysia's festival landscape is shaped by the country's rich cultural diversity, multilingual heritage, and vibrant traditions of public gathering and creative expression. Events are held across a wide geographic spread-from urban centres like Kuala Lumpur, Ipoh, Kuching, Johor Bahru, and George Town to smaller cities and rural areas. Thematic focus and artistic formats are similarly diverse, encompassing literature, film, visual and digital arts, crafts, performance,

theatre, and music. Collectively, these festivals contribute to Malaysia's creative life by providing spaces for artistic exchange, civic dialogue, and cultural celebration. They also play a role as strategic interventions to support sustainable development.

As highlighted in earlier research, Malaysia's festivals have long reflected the nation's multicultural vibrancy. Since then, this landscape has continued to diversify and mature. Building on a longstanding tradition of public festivals, the current landscape features a mix of long-established events and newer, experimental formats. Institutional festivals operate alongside grassroots initiatives, with many programmes developed through collaborations between public, private, and independent cultural actors. Notable examples include the George Town Literary Festival; On Reciprocity, a curatorial project by Borneo Laboratory exploring ecological and cultural narratives; Kreatif KL, a placemaking initiative activating downtown Kuala Lumpur through design and the arts; and Ipoh Kreatif, a youth-led platform focused on multidisciplinary expression.

“Young people in Malaysia, especially Gen Z, are really embracing dance festivals and EDM culture.”

— Arin Sharnaz Rashdi, CEO/Founder of Tala Records Asia

While music remains a prominent component of the festival scene, recent years have seen a noticeable shift toward electronic dance music (EDM) festivals, reflecting changing audience preferences and production models. At the same time, organisers in other disciplines continue to expand programming across literature, heritage, visual arts, and community-based practice. This diversity contributes to a dynamic and layered cultural offer that is responsive to both local contexts and wider regional trends.

A notable strength of Malaysia's festival ecosystem lies in its regional diversity. In East Malaysia, for instance, festivals often draw on local identities, traditions, and ecological knowledge. Organisations such as Borneo Laboratory, HAUS KCH, and the Sabah Creative Economy and Innovation Centre (SCENIC) are engaged in culturally grounded programming that explores sustainability, creative industries, and social impact.

Across the country, festivals are increasingly creating space for underrepresented voices and community narratives.

Sustainability has become a key concern for many organisers—both in terms of environmental responsibility and cultural continuity. Some events are integrating ecological themes into their content or adopting hybrid, lower-impact formats. Others are focused on cultural sustainability through intergenerational knowledge-sharing, amplifying minority perspectives, and supporting emerging voices in the arts.

These ambitions are delivered through a wide variety of organisational models. Many festivals are produced by small teams—often with fewer than five full-time staff—and rely on networks of freelance collaborators, volunteers, and local partners. Curatorial approaches are typically led in-house, though some festivals invite guest curators or run open calls. Programming tends to be interdisciplinary, combining exhibitions, performances, talks, screenings, residencies, and community workshops.

“We aspire to become a globally recognised festival brand—while remaining locally rooted, digitally innovative, and committed to sustainable cultural impact.”

— Joan Tan,
Head of Creative Economy, Think City

Events take place in a range of settings, including formal cultural venues, repurposed or informal spaces, and outdoor public areas. Online components—initially expanded during the COVID-19 pandemic—continue to feature in hybrid formats, particularly among youth-led or digitally engaged initiatives. While some festivals are recurring annual events, others operate episodically or as part of broader cultural projects.

"Some of the main festivals have become stale, just commercial vehicles. They programme old international acts and don't support talent or indie players. There's an imbalance in the ecosystem"

— Festival producer - anonymous

Malaysia's festival landscape continues to evolve in response to shifting audience expectations, production environments, and cultural priorities. It remains characterised by experimentation, resilience, and a strong sense of place. Despite challenges—particularly in securing sustainable funding and navigating post-pandemic recovery—organisers across the country are actively shaping cultural spaces that reflect the diversity of Malaysian society and contribute meaningfully to the broader Southeast Asian creative ecosystem.

"Festivals are sometimes like sticking plaster. It's sometimes easier to commission or sponsor a festival than to commit to long-term strategic development"

— Karen Shepherd, Director, Kuching City of Gastronomy

Funding dynamics

Malaysia's festivals continue to operate within a mixed funding model, drawing on public, private, and self-generated income. While public funding

remains limited and often tied to specific projects, some organisers have successfully established partnerships with government agencies to support cultural programming.

While festivals are recognised as a vital contributor to cultural dynamism and the wider Creative Industries, some cultural professionals are concerned that they have become over-used as short-term solutions to boost cultural activity in the absence of proper, joined-up State-level or federal cultural policy.

Private sector engagement is gradually expanding, particularly where festivals demonstrate strong audience reach or alignment with social and cultural priorities. To strengthen these partnerships, many organisers are investing in improved branding, audience insights, and communications strategies. However, there are some concerns that large-scale branded / corporate festivals are displacing the more independent and critically engaging festivals in Malaysia. Such larger-scale festivals tend to play it more safely and rely on 'heritage acts' to boost audiences, rather than pioneering new and diverse talent.

Self-generated income—through ticketing, workshops, merchandise, and crowdfunding—remains an important part of the funding mix. For many, these efforts foster community ownership and greater flexibility. International partnerships also continue to support artistic exchange and innovation, though access varies across the sector.

Overall, Malaysia's festivals reflect a strong sense of adaptability and resourcefulness. Despite ongoing challenges, organisers are actively seeking new models for long-term sustainability, underpinned by a desire to build strategic capacity and deepen cross-sector collaboration.

Skills development initiatives

Skills development is an increasingly embedded feature of Malaysia's festival ecosystem. Many festivals incorporate opportunities for talent

incubation, artistic exchange, and creative learning within their programming, often delivered in partnership with educational institutions, local organisations, and independent practitioners. These initiatives range from formal education programmes and artist residencies to informal peer-to-peer learning and collaborative production.

Festival organisers are placing particular emphasis on process-based approaches that encourage co-creation, mentorship, and the integration of emerging voices. In many cases, programming is intentionally participatory, involving young people, local communities, and new entrants to the creative sector. These models aim to foster inclusive cultural ecosystems while strengthening future talent pipelines.

Digital fluency has emerged as a key focus area. Festival organisers are seeking to build capacity around digital storytelling, virtual production, online audience engagement, and the use of digital platforms for programming and outreach. These efforts are often linked to broader ambitions to diversify audiences, experiment with hybrid formats, and adapt to changing consumption habits.

International exchange continues to play a significant role in building skills and confidence across the sector. Festival organisers highlight the importance of exposure to global trends, business models, and collaborative opportunities in supporting local capacity. Learning through international partnerships—whether through artist mobility, joint programming, or knowledge sharing—is valued as a catalyst for innovation.

However, most skills development remains informal and dependent on individual networks or project-based funding. Dedicated training programmes are rare, and limited staffing and financial resources continue to constrain the scale and continuity of skills initiatives. In this context, partnerships—particularly with

international and public sector actors—are critical to sustaining long-term development efforts.

Local skills needs and impact

Festival organisers across Malaysia identify a set of recurring skills needs which reflect both operational pressures and future ambitions for growth. Leadership and business planning are frequently cited as top priorities. These include competencies in strategic development, financial management, and long-term sustainability—areas that are increasingly important as festivals navigate complex funding environments and rising expectations.

Brand development and communications also emerge as critical gaps. Festival organisers recognise the need to enhance visibility, grow audiences, and improve stakeholder engagement, but often lack the skills or resources to deliver consistent and effective communications strategies. This is especially relevant for festivals seeking to attract commercial partnerships or international collaborations.

Digital capability is another area of pressing need. As hybrid programming models evolve, festivals require stronger skills in digital marketing, audience analytics, content creation for virtual platforms, and online community-building. While many organisers are experimenting in these areas, most report challenges in building consistent in-house expertise.

“KL, a city born at the confluence of two rivers, is where people, ideas, and communities converge. At the Kreatif KL Festival, the past meets the present as contemporary expressions unfold against the backdrop of our historic core. Downtown KL is being transformed into a sensory playground, offering a wealth of creative experiences for all to enjoy!”

— Think City

International collaboration potential

Malaysia holds strong potential to serve as a regional hub for international cultural collaboration. Its strategic geographic location, multicultural identity, and robust transport infrastructure make it an accessible and attractive base for cross-border exchange. The country's diverse creative landscape, supported by both institutional and independent actors, provides a rich foundation for artistic dialogue, touring, and co-creation.

With continued investment in mobility, funding access, and partnership-building, Malaysia is well placed to deepen its role in shaping collaborative cultural models across the region. Existing engagement with international artists and networks points to a wider opportunity: to position Malaysia not only as a host for global exchange, but as an active contributor to a more connected, resilient, and diverse cultural ecosystem in Southeast Asia.

Survey Headlines



Festivals blend heritage, contemporary arts, and community engagement.



Key skills needs are fundraising, policy literacy, and digital engagement.



Strategic priorities focus on cultural equity, local economies, and policy visibility.



Funding is inconsistent, with reliance on self-funding and informal support.

Festivals to Watch

Malaysia's festivals span arts, film, music, design, and heritage, highlighting creative diversity and public engagement. Below are some standout festivals. While this list showcases selected examples, it is by no means exhaustive and does not capture the full breadth of Malaysia's cultural calendar and festival landscape.

Mango Art Festival

Mango Art Festival is a dynamic visual-arts event that brings together local and international painters, sculptors, and multimedia artists. Spread across galleries, pop-up spaces, and public walls, the festival features art walks, live demonstrations, and ecological art projects that engage urban communities in creative exploration.

KreatifKL Festival

This new festival is initiated by Think City as part of the wider culture-led regeneration of the old downtown area of Kuala Lumpur. KreatifKL brings together over 100 events which showcase the area's renaissance and builds capacity across the ecosystem of independent cultural producers and hubs.

Malaysia International Film Festival (MIFFest)

As one of the nation's premier cinematic events, MIFFest screens feature films, shorts, and documentaries from Malaysia and around the world. Each edition includes industry panels, masterclasses, and networking opportunities, fostering collaboration between emerging local filmmakers and seasoned international professionals.

Warner Music Fest (WMF)

Celebrating over a decade of uniting Malaysia's music scene, Warner Music Fest showcases top local and regional artists across genres such as pop, rock, hip-hop, and electronic dance music. WMF combines live performances with interactive fan zones, artist meet-and-greets, and music-industry showcases.

Sasaran Art Festival

Also known as the Sasaran International Art Festival, it is held in a fishing village and brings together global artists for site-specific installations, murals, and workshops in community settings.

Kuala Lumpur Design Festival

This annual festival transforms the city into a hub of creative innovation, featuring exhibitions, workshops, and design sprints. KL Design Festival spotlights graphic design, product design, architecture, and digital design through gallery installations, pop-up markets, and masterclasses led by leading Malaysian and international designers.

George Town Literary Festival (GTLF)

Organised by the Penang Institute, GTLF is Malaysia's largest international literary festival, held every November in George Town. The festival brings writers, translators, poets, and thinkers from across the globe to explore themes of literature, heritage, and identity through readings, panel discussions, and community outreach programs.

Sabah Kaamatan Festival

Celebrated each May throughout Sabah, Kaamatan Festival honors the harvest traditions of the Kadazan-Dusun, Murut, and Rungus communities. Culminating in Penampang, the festival features traditional music and dance (Sumazau), beauty pageants (Unduk Ngadau), communal feasting, and cultural performances that pay tribute to Indigenous heritage.

Ipoh Kreative

Held annually in Ipoh, Perak, Ipoh Kreative is a multidisciplinary arts and culture platform organized by Projek Rabak. Focusing on youth culture, design, visual arts, music, and community engagement, the event combines exhibitions, live performances, and hands-on workshops to showcase grassroots creative expression.

Borneo ROR Fest (Revive Our Roots)

Taking place in Sabah, Borneo ROR Fest is an environmental and cultural festival presented in collaboration with WWF Malaysia. The festival raises awareness of local ecological issues through creative programming, including live performances, exhibitions, interactive workshops, and storytelling sessions with Indigenous communities.

RIUH

A travelling creative lifestyle series organized by MyCreative Ventures, RIUH activates public spaces nationwide while remaining headquartered in Kuala Lumpur. Each pop-up event features curated markets, live music, artisanal products, and gourmet food experiences that support local brands and independent creatives.

Projek Rabak (Cultural Platform)

Based in Ipoh, Projek Rabak operates year-round as an arts collective and event organiser, running multiple cultural initiatives including Ipoh Kreative. Acting as a sustained platform for artistic production, it empowers youth-led cultural activation through collaborative projects, residencies, and community-driven events.

Haus KCH Programmes

Situated in Kuching, Sarawak, Haus KCH curates seasonal cultural programmes that resemble festival-style events. Through artist residencies, rotating exhibitions, and public performances, Haus KCH functions as a key hub for contemporary arts in East Malaysia, fostering collaboration among local and regional creatives.

Kids Storytelling Festival

A smaller-scale community-based event designed to foster reading and storytelling among children. It focuses on traditional and contemporary storytelling methods, encouraging youth creativity and literacy.

Iskandar Puteri Jazz Festival

An annual jazz celebration featuring local and international jazz musicians, contributing to Johor Bahru's evolving cultural landscape.

Pasir Gudang International Kite Festival

Held in Pasir Gudang, this festival attracts international kite flyers and promotes cultural exchange through traditional and modern kite designs.

Kelantan International Wau (Giant Kite) Festival

This festival in Kota Bharu celebrates the traditional art of wau (kite) making and flying, with international participants joining local artisans.

East Coast Textile Craft Festival

A regional festival focused on promoting traditional textile arts such as batik and songket. It includes live weaving and dyeing demos, drawing attention to heritage skills.

Kota Kinabalu Jazz Festival

An annual event showcasing jazz musicians from Malaysia and abroad. It's an important part of the city's music and nightlife culture.

North Borneo Rainforest Festival

Held in connection with ecotourism, this festival blends indigenous culture, music, and environmental awareness, typically in a natural forested setting.

Melaka Art & Performance Festival (MAP Fest)

Hosted within Melaka's heritage sites, MAP Fest is Malaysia's only site-specific contemporary arts festival, blending performance, visual arts, and heritage in public spaces.

Freedom Film Fest

Malaysia's longest-running human rights documentary festival (annual, since 2003), showcasing films, talks, and workshops that highlight social justice issues and amplify community voices across the country.



Photo credit Projek Rabak

Case study

Projek Rabak

Facebook: facebook.com/projekrabak/

Instagram: [@projekrabak](https://www.instagram.com/projekrabak)



- ✓ Example of an independent collective catalysing festivals and events.
- ✓ Strong focus on youth empowerment, inclusion and skills / knowledge exchange.
- ✓ Demonstrates the importance of informal and professional networks for the festival ecosystem.

Projek Rabak is an artist collective based in the city of Ipoh, a couple of hours north of Kuala Lumpur. Projek Rabak was founded by Mohd Jayzuan with five other Ipoh friends in 2011. The collective focuses on nurturing diverse, often youthful creative talent, providing platforms and pathways for their development. Its interdisciplinary interests speak to the cultural reality in Ipoh and other parts of Malaysia, where different creative sectors and art forms are becoming more convergent and interdisciplinary. This has helped to shape an events and festivals sector which frequently cuts across traditional art form boundaries.

Projek Rabak has initiated multiple projects: the book publishing house, Rabak-Lit (2012), their first art space; Khizanat (2013), Rabak Studio (2013), Projek Rabak Gallery (2015), Rumah Khizanat (2015) and the week-long arts festival 'Ipoh Kreatif' (2015-2017). Festival and events production are central to their work, with Mohd working as a champion and intermediary for creative talent, supporting talent to find its voice.

Ipoh Kreatif was an interdisciplinary festival which fused the distinctive cultural identities and narratives of Ipoh to showcase talent and foster collaboration. It began life as a DIY initiative, then attracted State sponsorship. However, once this sponsorship elapsed, it proved difficult to continue with the festival – a key part of the learning journey for Projek Rabak, where partners have learned not to depend on the State for funding or support. Mohd and his Projek Rabak team continue to develop festivals and events across Malaysia – for example at Publika, the creative hub and shopping mall in Selangor;

and more recently via the Ipoh Alternative Book Fair, which mimics the Kuala Lumpur Alternative Book Fest, with a focus on zines, graphic novels and all manner of indie literature.

The Projek Rabak Collective play a vital role in connecting talent across the country and as a go-to source of expertise and know-how when it comes to generating a creative scene, with festivals and events to their heart. They are currently working on a new festival on the Perak coast which combines experimental film, music and poetry while giving the natural landscape of the coast a starring role.

Their passion is for culture, but especially for nurturing local cultures in their home city of Ipoh. The Collective develops multiple meet-ups, events and collaborative activities in spite of significant gaps in support and infrastructure for culture and the Creative Industries in Ipoh. There is, for example, a shortage of fit for purpose venues

“DIY is my principle. We have built a Collective which brings people together and makes things happen. We celebrate friendship”.

— Mohd Jayzuan, Co-founder of Projek Rabak

“We don’t even have a theatre black box”! Therefore, they work as advocates for the cultural vitality of their city and wider Malaysia, supporting event and festival production across the country. They also work collaboratively at an ASEAN level, with especially strong connections to Indonesia.

Mohd recognises that his expertise, connections and collaborative spirit are key assets in a country where festivals do come and go, where State and other sponsorship is unpredictable, and where festivals can struggle to obtain permits without the right connections and mechanisms.

For a thriving festival sector, every country needs creative producers, connectors and catalysts such as Projek Rabak. They join the dots, provide expertise and relish in the opportunities collaborations bring.

“We work with other festivals across Malaysia. We are committed to empowering the community and supporting skills and education so other festivals and events can happen. We also provide the crew if it is needed and work hard to promote creative enterprises and F&B joints. We are also very open on gender and ethnicity”.

— Mohd Jayzuan, Co-founder of Projek Rabak

- ✓ Opportunities for international and cross-art-form collaboration – connect with Projek Rabak to plug into the DIY Malaysian cultural scene.
- ✓ Open to co-production and touring – across all art forms.
- ✓ Sets up safe spaces for cultural dialogue, community building and creative enterprise.

MYANMAR

Festivals of hope



Overview

Myanmar- formerly Burma- borders Bangladesh and India, China, Laos, and Thailand. With over 54 million people across diverse ethnic groups and landscapes, from the Irrawaddy basin to highland border regions. Urban centres like Yangon, Mandalay, and Naypyidaw coexist with rural townships where traditional life remains central. A political shift in 2021, imposed curfews and assembly restrictions, large cultural events stalled. In addition, major natural disasters, such as the 2025 earthquake close to Mandalay, have contributed to the precarity and acute fragility of all types of cultural practice. Yet Myanmar's rich heritage—literature, performing arts, classical crafts, architecture, and Theravāda Buddhist rituals—persists through small religious ceremonies, virtual platforms, and diaspora efforts, highlighting the creative community's resilience and the ways cultural professionals increasingly work across borders.

Cultural context

Myanmar's cultural ecosystem is grounded in a millennia-long devotion to Theravāda Buddhism and a multifaceted tapestry of ethnic traditions. Traditional arts-ranging from sandaya piano music that imitates native harp and drum ensembles, to lacquerware, woodcarving, and metalworking- have been continuously developed over many centuries through master-apprentice lineages. The 1974 National Culture Policy enshrined equality for all ethnic and religious groups while calling for a "Burmese way to Socialism" that fused indigenous heritage with broader state objectives. In the post-1988 era, the seven-step Road Map further elevated cultural preservation as a pillar of national reconciliation and stability, charging the Ministry of Culture with safeguarding both tangible and intangible heritage. However, such frameworks or models for cultural development are all currently on hold given the current political realities of Myanmar.

State-run institutions have historically played a central role in sustaining and revitalizing classical forms. The Schools of Dance, Music, Drama, and Fine Arts in Yangon and Mandalay have trained new generations of performers and artisans, while the National Museum of Art and Archaeology—and affiliated regional archaeological museums—preserve relics, manuscripts, and architectural fragments. Government patronage throughout the 2000s and 2010s enabled revivals of sandaya and lacquerwork, even as some crafts-like bronze casting among Bamar and minority communities-contracted amid changing economic realities.

Concurrently, 20th-century imports such as cinema and rock music became integral to Myanmar's contemporary cultural landscape: In the 2010s, state-run film schools and community screening circles nurtured local filmmakers, and underground music scenes in Yangon and Mandalay reflected global influences reconciled with Burmese lyrical and melodic traditions. In practice, however, these institutions have seen sharply reduced programming and funding since the political transition, meaning that many workshops, exhibitions, and master-apprentice schemes now operate at a much lower scale.

In more recent years, programming at these institutions has adapted to evolving circumstances, leading to a lighter calendar of workshops, exhibitions, and master-apprentice schemes. At the same time, a resilient network of community-based groups and diaspora-led initiatives ensures that Myanmar's creative energy endures. Local NGOs and border-region collectives provide ad hoc training in design, video editing, and digital archiving - especially valuable when opportunities for cultural expression are more limited in-country. Virtual exhibitions and online masterclasses, often coordinated by artists working abroad, maintain vital cross-border collaborations. This layered landscape-where traditional arts remain rooted in daily ritual and heritage sites, institutional frameworks quietly preserve classical instruction, and new digital platforms emerge-will be well positioned to expand once conditions allow.

Festival landscape

Myanmar's cultural landscape is heavily influenced by religion. For Buddhist practice, a mosaic of ethnic traditions manifest through a spectrum of communal festivals. At their core lies a set of pagoda-based celebrations-seasonal merit-making, lantern-lit evenings, and ritual water-splashing ceremonies. These activities ensure a continuity of religious observance even when large gatherings are formally curtailed. Local pagoda committees continue to organise modest merit-making days and small-scale fairs, preserving classical dance, puppet theatre, and artisan markets in village precincts. Likewise, the annual Performing Arts Competition (celebrating singing, dancing, marionette, and compositional traditions) still convenes contestants from multiple ethnic groups, albeit with fewer spectators and simplified programmes, reaffirming cultural unity through shared ritual and performance.

Before 2021, parallel to these enduring rites, there were traces of an emergent contemporary festival scene-independent film screenings, open-air music showcases, and volunteer-run literary gathering. The Wathann Film Festival in Yangon curated short independent fiction and documentary works for local and regional audiences, while the Irrawaddy Literary Festival brought together Myanmar and international authors under a volunteer-led, not-for-profit model. The Myanmar Music Festival similarly convened national talent and international faculty for masterclasses and concerts.

After 2021, most festivals have been forced into dormancy or adapted into hybrid digital formats, often with collaboration across borders. The Science Film Festival (in partnership with Goethe-Institut and Myanmar YMCA) adopted a hybrid model-screening sustainability-themed films across multiple cities with local-language dubbing and virtual discussions. At the same time, festival practitioners contributed to international and regional events: Myanmar theatre artists presented a filmed Forum Theatre piece to

TERASIA Online Week (an international virtual festival hosted abroad), alumni of the Wathann Film Festival submitted short films to the Bangkok Short Film Festival, and Myanmar artists in exile showcased work at the Mekong + Arts Biennale in Chiang Rai.

The result is a dual ecosystem: village-level pagoda fairs that sustain social cohesion with minimal fanfare, and nascent virtual and cross-border events that keep creative networks alive until broader conditions permit a full revival of larger-scale, in-person cultural programming.

Spotlight: Festivals pre-2021

Before 2021, Myanmar experienced a notable rise in independent cultural gatherings that bridged local creativity with international networks. Two illustrative examples-the Irrawaddy Literary Festival and the Myanmar Music Festival-demonstrated how volunteer-driven initiatives and supportive partnerships enabled practitioners to cultivate new audiences, share expertise, and position Myanmar on the regional arts map. Both festivals thrived during a period of broader openness, drawing on diaspora connections and institutional backing to offer programming that celebrated longstanding traditions while introducing fresh perspectives.

The Irrawaddy Literary Festival debuted in February 2013, at a time when Myanmar was increasingly engaging with the wider world. As a not-for-profit, volunteer-led event, it brought together over 30 international authors alongside more than 100 Myanmar writers whose work had previously been less visible. Over five days, more than 10,000 visitors attended free panels, readings, and workshops-an achievement made possible entirely through sponsorships and in-kind support, with no fees paid to participants. Following its successful launch, the festival continued annually through 2019, nurturing a culture of literary exchange that connected Yangon's readers to global conversation. In recent years, local circumstances have led to a temporary hiatus; however, the organising boards remain hopeful that the festival will reconvene when conditions permit, continuing its mission of fostering open dialogue and cross-cultural understanding.

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Launched in 2014 by 88 International, the Myanmar Music Festival embodies a parallel effort to enhance the country's classical-music profile. During one- to two-week residencies in Yangon and Mandalay, the festival invited respected conservatory faculty from abroad to mentor Myanmar's most promising pianists, violinists, vocalists, and chamber ensembles. Participants engaged in intensive masterclasses, orchestral workshops, and one-on-one coaching sessions that reflected international conservatory standards, while public concerts in prominent venues allowed Yangon audiences to experience Western repertoire performed by local musicians. Supported by cultural organisations and occasional embassy collaborations, the festival quickly became a focal point for cross-cultural exchange and technical refinement. In recent months, evolving conditions have prompted organisers to explore virtual formats to maintain engagement until larger gatherings can once again take place.

Together, these two festivals illustrate how, in a relatively brief span, Myanmar's creative community harnessed volunteerism, diaspora connections, and institutional support to build platforms that celebrated both heritage and innovation. Their current pause underscores the need for sensitivity to the broader environment, yet the foundations they established- rooted in mentorship, free access, and collaborative spirit- offer a durable basis for a renewed era of in-person cultural programming.

Funding dynamics

Prior to 2021, Myanmar's festivals typically operated under a mixed funding model that combined modest government allocations, private-sector sponsorships, and community-driven support. Local authorities provided baseline resources-venue access, basic equipment, and small grants-to help sustain traditional pagoda fairs and performing-arts competitions. However, funding has historically been very limited and has favoured certain religious groups over others.

In the 2010s, up to 2021, private sponsors, including local businesses and service providers, offered in-kind assistance such as venue rental, refreshments, or modest cash contributions for selected events. Ticket sales, generally priced at nominal rates, supplemented these sources but rarely covered full production costs, making community fundraising-through donations of rice, oil, or flowers-a common way to offset logistical expenses and ensure that both traditional and emerging contemporary festivals could proceed.

Since early 2021, shifting priorities have meant that formal budgetary support for new and independent festivals has ceased. Festival organisers, if they have been able to continue with any cultural activity, have had to rely increasingly on decentralised, community-driven funding and diaspora-led crowdfunding. Township committees often revert to in-kind contributions from villagers to stage small-scale merit-making ceremonies and minimal cultural gatherings. Meanwhile, emerging creative initiatives-including hybrid film screenings, online theatre presentations, and virtual workshops-now draw on in-kind support, some modest crowdfunding, and peer-to-peer donations from artists working abroad.

Skills development initiatives

As traditional workshop venues became less accessible after early 2021, any skills and capacity-building initiatives shifted to remote delivery-providing online coaching in editing, livestream tools, and audience engagement-to ensure continuity of core competencies.

Myanmar Creatives in Regional Festivals

Myanmar's artists maintain a presence in regional cultural networks through collaborative and digital platforms. In July 2022, a Myanmar theatre collective contributed a filmed Forum Theatre piece to TERASIA Online Week, a pan-Asian virtual festival that rotates among participating countries. Presented alongside works from Thailand, Indonesia, and the Philippines, the Myanmar segment exemplified how local practitioners leverage regional initiatives to reach audiences across borders-sustaining performance traditions when live staging in Myanmar proved untenable.

Film producers have similarly connected with wider networks via the Science Film Festival, a Goethe-Institut initiative that operates across Southeast Asia. In late 2022, the 13th edition in Myanmar adopted a hybrid model, screening sustainability-themed films in Yangon, Mandalay, Nay Pyi Taw, Maubin, and Patheingyi with local-language dubbing and online discussions. While primarily focused on in-country youth engagement, the festival's affiliation with a regional Goethe-organized network underscored Myanmar's inclusion in a circuit that spans Laos, Cambodia, and Viet Nam. Deliberate technical support-subtitling, cross-site streaming, and volunteer coordination-enabled local filmmakers to participate in a broader conversation around environmental storytelling, even as travel restrictions limited in-person exchange.

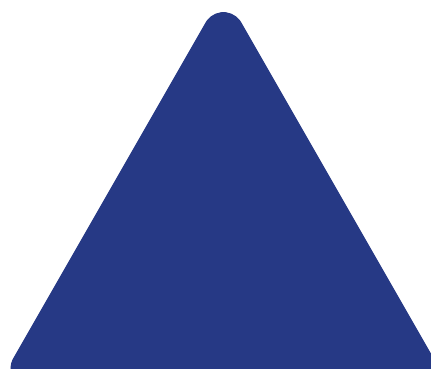
Through these avenues-be it a virtual theatre showcase or a hybrid film program-Myanmar creatives sustain dialogue with Southeast Asian peers, ensuring that their work remains visible and responsive to regional themes. By embedding local productions within established networks, they not only preserve artistic momentum at home but also reinforce Myanmar's cultural ties across ASEAN. Their continuous experimentation with hybrid formats positions them to re-engage fully once broader conditions allow.

International collaboration potential

Myanmar's festival sector presents potential for deeper regional and international collaboration, though current political constraints make formal partnerships challenging. For the wider ASEAN cultural sector and festival ecosystem, there is much to be gained by engaging with the talent still based in Myanmar, as well as the growing Myanmar creative diaspora. Moreover, it is in the interests of the global cultural sector to support the rights of artists wherever they are to freely express themselves - in keeping with the 2005 UN Convention on the Protection and Promotion of a Diversity of Cultural Expressions.

Myanmar's creative community has benefited from connections with expatriate practitioners and regional partners, who help maintain visibility for local artistic work without relying on extensive in-country gatherings. Expatriate artists and cultural managers sustain momentum by curating virtual exhibitions, facilitating remote workshops, and sourcing modest crowdfunding to underwrite small-scale digital initiatives. These efforts operate independently of formal domestic channels, providing a discreet mechanism for sharing new work and sustaining professional networks during a period when larger events are less feasible. In this way, diaspora contributions help ensure that Myanmar's creative voices remain part of wider regional conversations, even as local festival organisers focus on more modest community projects.

Looking ahead, there is scope to build on these informal connections by embedding Myanmar contributors into existing Southeast Asian cultural exchanges. Coordinating virtual residencies or curated segments of regional festivals through third-country partners would allow Myanmar artists to participate without necessitating large in-person gatherings or formal governmental approval. Similarly, co-produced online showcases and skills activities-hosted on shared platforms-can offer timely exposure and skills-sharing opportunities, aligning with evolving models of low-risk cultural engagement. By prioritising digital-first collaborations and working through regional hubs, stakeholders can lay the groundwork for a gradual, sustainable expansion of Myanmar's festival presence once broader conditions are in place.



Festivals to Watch

Prior to 2021, Myanmar saw an emergent contemporary festival scene. In recent years, some events have paused, while others have transitioned to hybrid formats. Below is a list of key festivals to monitor for potential revival once conditions permit. While this list showcases selected examples, it is by no means exhaustive and does not capture the full breadth of Myanmar's cultural calendar and festival landscape.

Irrawaddy Literary Festival

A volunteer-run, not-for-profit event launched in 2013, bringing together international authors and Myanmar writers for free panels, readings, and workshops; held annually through 2019, it fostered literary exchange and public dialogue.

Myanmar Music Festival

Established in 2014 by 88 International, this biennial classical-music residency convened conservatory faculty from abroad to coach Myanmar's top pianists, violinists, vocalists, and ensembles, culminating in public recitals that showcased Western repertoire performed by local musicians.

Wathann Film Festival

Founded in 2011 as Myanmar's first independent film festival, it curated annual lineups of short fiction and documentary works by local and regional filmmakers, offered production workshops, and connected Myanmar's emerging directors with Southeast Asian peers.

Science Film Festival (Myanmar)

Organised by Myanmar YMCA and Goethe-Institut Myanmar, its 13th edition (Nov–Dec 2022) adopted a hybrid model-screening sustainability-themed films across Yangon, Mandalay, Nay Pyi Taw, Maubin, and Patheingyi with local-language dubbing and virtual discussions.

Performing Arts Competition (25th Silver Jubilee)

A state-sponsored contest held in late 2023, attracting performers from multiple ethnic groups to showcase classical dance, folk music, marionette art, and composition under a theme of "unity among national races," with winners receiving cash prizes and certificates.

TERASIA Participations (Online Week 2022)

While not a Myanmar-based festival, Yangon theatre artists contributed a filmed Forum Theatre piece to this pan-Asian virtual event-enabling local practitioners to present work alongside peers from Thailand, Indonesia, and the Philippines.



Photo Courtesy of Thaid Di and Thu Thu Shein

Case study

Wathann Film Festival

Facebook: facebook.com/wathannfilmfestival/



- ✓ Example of resilience and agility in a changing and fragile context.
- ✓ Combines talent and audience development, showcasing and networking.
- ✓ Provides a vital space for independent creatives to network and collaborate.

The Wathann Film Festival is the first and longest running film festival in Myanmar. It is co-directed and co-founded by Thaid Dhi and Thu Thu Shein, who both studied as film-makers, specialising in cinematography and documentaries via workshops in Yangon Film School (2005-2008). This was followed by the opportunity to study at FAMU in Prague, which introduced them both to Czech film culture. Thaid Di and Thu Thu are driven by an ambition to develop the Myanmar independent film sector and to showcase Burmese talent locally and in international festivals. In 2007, they both received scholarships to study cinematography in Prague, which proved inspiring.

“It was the first time we had seen film festivals outside the country. We believed we could do something – to show our films to the Myanmar audience and internationally”.

— Thaid Di and Thu Thu, Founders of the Wathann Film Festival

The first Wathann Film Festival was held over five days in 2011 in a Buddhist Monastery – viewed as a relatively safe space for cultural dialogue. Thaid Di and Thu Thu showcased their own films and some other locally produced films – a result of putting out a call to other film-makers. They didn’t know at the time if this would prove successful, indeed if there were other film-makers in Myanmar who were ready and willing to showcase their work.

In Myanmar, independent film-making as a creative discipline was very emergent, with the country in a period of political transition and new technology enabling un-trained film-makers to experiment and develop new content, most of it short-form. But these were still politically sensitive times, requiring all cultural producers to consider carefully what activities might be eligible or attract the attention of the authorities. This context prompted Thaid Di and Thu Thu to focus on the art of storytelling rather than activism.

“We met a lot of new young filmmakers... like shaking the tree...we started to find each other”.

They see their role as intermediaries and champions for film-making in Myanmar, a country which lacks the usual infrastructure, programmes and incentives for the cultural and creative industries across all sectors, and a country stricken by natural disasters and political turbulence, including widespread and deep-set censorship.

In 2013, the Festival relocated to the Waziya Cinema in central Yangon – an old heritage cinema owned by the Ministry of Information. This was a symbolic moment in the festival’s development, building profile and acclaim for Myanmar film-making talent. The festival showcased a diverse programme of short-films and documentaries, as well as publishing and promoting two European books on film-making, giving local film-makers access to international approaches.

“We have a ‘triangle’ approach through our love of film: support and train the film-maker to develop new stories, showcase and network through the festival, and develop new audiences who in turn become passionate about film.”

In 2014, the Festival moved again - to the Yangon Gallery - with permission not granted to use the Waziya Cinema (an example of the fragile and unpredictable context for festival development in Myanmar). With one funder pulling out, the organisers also had to step in for this festival and self-finance the event.

Then from 2015-16, the Festival was able to move back to the Waziya Cinema, in part thanks to support from the Japan Foundation, which also supported a programme of animation workshops and exchange activities between Japan and Myanmar. The Festival stayed in the Cinema until the COVID-19 pandemic. It grew and diversified each year, extending to the Goethe Institut for some of the programming.

Audiences peaked at 4,500 and the festival developed a strong track record in delivering specialised training for film-makers, including a three-month training programme for 12 young film-makers, overseen by local and international experts (sponsored by the FAMU Film School, Czech Republic). In the mid-2010s, Thaid Di and Thu Thu also developed small travelling projects where they held screenings in small cities and rural areas. They also provided ‘teashop training’ where short films were shown in tea shop settings for an invited audience.

In 2020, with the COVID-19 pandemic forcing all activities online, the Festival held its 10th edition, which also coincided with the 100th anniversary of Myanmar Cinema. With over 150,000 views, this was the most watched of all the Wathann Film Festivals, inspiring and re-energising Thaid Di and Thu Thu to continue to develop and support film culture in Myanmar.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, and then the change in leadership, Thaid Di and Thu Thu continue to play a leadership role for Myanmar film. Yet with the current political context, it is not possible to stage a full-scale film festival. Passionate about local talent and the role of film in the nation’s cultural and creative development,

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, and then the change in leadership, Thaid Di and Thu Thu continue to play a leadership role for Myanmar Film. Yet with the current political context, it is not possible to stage a full-scale film festival. Passionate about local talent and the role of film in the nation's cultural and creative development, Thaid Di and Thu Thu have shown enormous creativity, resourcefulness and resilience. They also continue to engage young talent with an ambition to lead a new generation of feature film-making in Myanmar, supporting script-writing and promoting young talent. This includes a short film programme hosted at the Goethe-Institut.

“This helped us to find out who is still in the country...There’s nothing on the ground – so we can shape what’s on the ground. We have a really long-term plan and we can’t rely on funding which comes and goes”.

Thaid Di and Thu Thu have shown enormous creativity, resourcefulness and resilience. They also continue to engage young talent with an ambition to lead a new generation of feature film-making in Myanmar, supporting script-writing and promoting young talent. This includes a short film programme hosted at the Goethe Institut.

In recent years, Thaid Di and Thu Thu have adapted to the increasingly prohibitive political landscape, where many film-makers have left the country and the public presentation of film is not permitted. Their love of film and story-telling powers them on. Their recent work includes a collaboration with ‘Save Myanmar Film’, in an attempt to rescue and present national film archives. In 2023, they participated in the British Council’s Connections Through Culture programme, with a focus on young women film-makers. This included a collaboration with the London Short Film Festival with screenings held in the safe space of the British Council.

The story of Wathann Film Festival is a story of adaptability, conviction and passion. Thaid Di and Thu Thu combine a love of film with a love of the creative stories of Myanmar, including those everyday, under-documented aspects of culture. They remain ambitious – to build a film sector in Myanmar which can work collaboratively as equals with film-makers across ASEAN and internationally. They also want to build on recent successes in showcasing Myanmar film in international festivals, giving creative practitioners hope in a time of such pain and uncertainty.

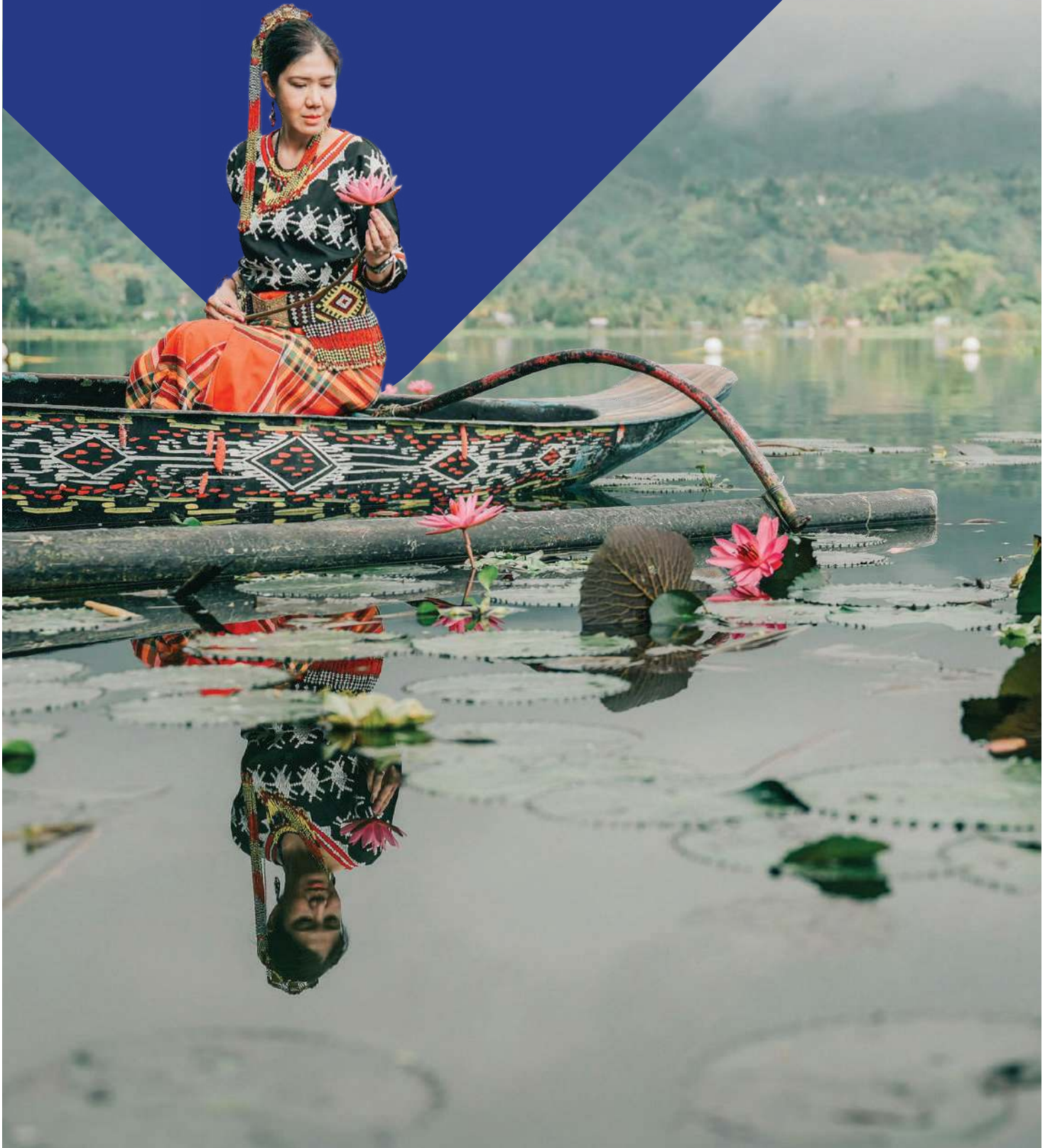


Wathann Film Festival. Photo Credit Thaid Di and Thu Thu Shein

- ✓ Opportunities for international collaboration – e.g. in training and showcasing of Myanmar films.
- ✓ Source of talent from across Myanmar – for festivals looking to connect with the country.
- ✓ Key partner to international agencies developing cultural activities in Myanmar.

The Philippines

Grassroots festivals driving
a creative renaissance



Overview

The Philippines is a 7,000-island archipelago with 116 million people and a climate that supports festivals year-round. Metro Manila (13M residents), Cebu, and Davao are major cultural hubs, while Iloilo, Bacolod, Zamboanga, Baguio, and General Santos host vibrant local celebrations. More than 175 ethnolinguistic groups shape regional identities; Tagalog, Cebuano and Ilocano are the largest groups. Filipino and English serve as official languages. Roughly 80 % of the population is Roman Catholic, and faith, folk traditions and crafts—such as weaving, street parades and food fairs—animate the country’s creative scene, reflected in UNESCO titles for Baguio, Cebu and Iloilo.

Cultural context

The cultural and creative industries (CCIs) in the Philippines comprise sectors such as music, dance, visual arts, crafts, fashion, digital media, and literature. These sectors are interwoven with festival production, audience development, and tourism. According to the Philippine Creative Industries Development Plan, the government aims to position the country as Asia’s leading creative hub by 2030 (Department of Trade and Industry, 2023).

The Philippine Creative Industries Development Act (RA 11904) provides a legislative framework to grow creative sectors, recognising festivals as platforms for talent incubation, creative entrepreneurship, and cultural tourism. National programmes such as "Malikhaing Pinoy" support innovation across creative communities.

Local government units (LGUs) are encouraged to support cultural programmes through the National Cultural Heritage Act (RA 10066), which tasks cities with creating local cultural inventories

and mapping traditions. The Department of the Interior and Local Government also guides LGUs to establish cultural councils and integrate culture into development plans.

Festival landscape

The Philippines has one of Southeast Asia’s most dynamic and community-rooted festival landscapes, with events spanning traditional rites, religious celebrations, contemporary arts, and sector-specific showcases. Many festivals begin as grassroots or cultural expressions and are later supported by local governments and national agencies. Festivals contribute significantly to the creative economy by generating employment, supporting small enterprises, promoting regional culture, and attracting domestic tourism. Key trends include:

- the professionalisation of programming
- digital experimentation
- cross-sector collaboration
- growth in advocacy-based and regional initiatives.

A tiered policy framework then underwrites that growth— the National Commission for Culture and the Arts (NCCA) grants supply seed funding, the Department of Tourism (DOT) adds marketing

“We envision our Festival as a space for imagining futures with local community theatre groups, regional partners, and young people— sharing stories of change through live, interactive theater, blending digital tools, and reaching out to the international scene. It aims to go beyond hopeful local stories and build transnational collaborations.”

— Joanna Marie L. Katanyag, Festival Artistic Director, PETA Control + Shift Changing Narratives Festival

muscle, and empowered local governments act as principal organisers and co-investors. Together these levers create a decentralised yet coordinated environment that preserves heritage, mobilises civic participation and drives visitor demand.

The impact of festivals in the Philippines is cultural, economic and social. Festivals often drive domestic tourism and contribute to small enterprise growth, including food vendors, artisans, transport providers, and local accommodations. In cities like Baguio, Cebu, and Davao, flagship festivals anchor annual cultural calendars and stimulate community participation. In smaller towns, festivals reinforce local traditions and foster intergenerational transmission of knowledge.

Funding dynamics

Festival finance in the Philippines is decentralised and highly mixed. National bodies (NCCA, DOT) supply grants and technical aid, but day-to-day budgets are largely shouldered by local governments and city-level sponsors- Panagbenga in Baguio, for instance, runs on c. ₱17 million (USD 305k) drawn from municipal funds and private partners. Independent or sector-specific events-FIFTH WALL FEST, Control + Shift, Cinemalaya-lean on volunteerism, donor grants, crowdfunding or, in Cinemalaya's case, Cultural Center of the Philippines (CCP) and foundation backing. Key challenges include:

- uneven access to finance outside major cities
- short annual funding cycles that impede long-term planning
- limited professional skills in festival management and fundraising
- a private-sponsorship landscape still concentrated on high-profile urban events

While the current funding environment enables cultural diversity and local leadership, strengthening public-private partnerships and improving access to

professional resources will be essential for equitable and sustainable growth.

By 2030 I hope that FIFTH WALL will have consistent funding sources to support growth of the platform and its programming, a dedicated team of full-timers, and a solid network of collaborators and audience in both local and foreign settings.

— JMadge Reyes, Executive & Artistic Director
of FIFTH WALL

Skills development initiatives

Many festivals in the Philippines include workshops, artist residencies and talks aimed at nurturing skills in event management, creative production, curation, community arts, and digital storytelling. For example, Control + Shift includes mentorship and creative labs, while Mindanao Art offers training on exhibition design and creative entrepreneurship. ArteFino supports capacity building in design, sustainability, and craft business management.

Government support for festival-related skills is channelled through the NCCA's School of Living Traditions (SLT) and the Design Center of the Philippines, which supports maker skills and design entrepreneurship. Public institutions such as the CCP also run year-round training linked to sector-specific festivals like Cinemalaya (film) and TERNOCON (fashion).

Local skills needs and impact

Festival organisers consistently cite the need for stronger skills in production management, digital engagement, marketing, stage design, and sound/lighting technology. Smaller festivals also require administrative training, such as grant writing, sponsorship, accounting; as well as tools for audience development. Regions outside Metro Manila often lack access to training hubs and creative infrastructure.

Festivals to Watch

The Philippines has one of Southeast Asia's most dynamic and community-rooted festival landscapes, with events spanning traditional rites, religious celebrations, contemporary arts, and sector-specific showcases. Below are a few examples of festivals that trace this spectrum. While this list showcases selected examples, it is by no means exhaustive and does not capture the full breadth of the Philippines' cultural calendar and festival landscape.

Malasimbo Music & Arts Festival

World-jazz, hip-hop and large-scale light sculptures activate a UNESCO-listed citadel; family workshops and live-painting duels blend heritage with new-media art. After weather disruptions, the boutique festival returns 4 May 2025 at Intramuros' Puerta Real Gardens, pairing electronic, world-beat, and kids' programming with heritage-site activation.

Fête de la Musique PH

Now on its 31st year, the free, multi-stage event (21 – 30 Jun 2025) partners with Alliance Française and the French Embassy to animate 100+ stages nationwide, from Makati to Siargao.

PLUS63 Festival

Having outgrown Cebu, PLUS63 debuts in Manila on 23 Feb 2025 with Kehlani, RINI, and emerging OPM acts-advancing a "multi-city" vision for international R&B in the archipelago.

Wanderland Festival

Marking a decade on 22–23 Mar 2025, this indie-alt fair at Filinvest City grounds (Muntinlupa) combines music, live art, and sustainability labs, cementing its status as the country's leading home-grown outdoor music brand.

Manila International Book Fair (MIBF)

Southeast Asia's longest-running book expo returns 10–14 Sep 2025 at SMX, uniting 200+ publishers, rights traders, and literacy NGOs under the banner "Read Global, Publish Local."

Design Week Philippines

Led by the Design Center of the Philippines, the October 2025 edition (11–18 Oct) staged 100+ talks, tours, and hack-sprints across 17 cities, championing "Islandness"-driven design solutions.

FIFTH WALL FEST

Edition VI (Oct 2025) scales its "Dance from All Angles®" concept-merging film, live movement, and site-specific residencies-to position Manila as Southeast Asia's hub for dance-film innovation.

Mindanao Art Fair

Mindanao's largest art market readies its 7th edition (27 Sep–6 Oct 2025, Davao), convening 35+ galleries and 400 artists to highlight the island's "Art on the Edge" narrative. Through exhibitions, discussions, and immersive experiences, the festival aims to cultivate appreciation for the arts, support artists' careers, provide online visibility, and build a thriving, sustainable art community that extends beyond the festival.

QCinema International Film Festival

A Quezon City initiative that funds new Filipino features and QCShorts; its 12th round in Nov 2024 drew record audiences and announced the 2025 filmmakers slate, reinforcing Manila's indie-film ecosystem.

Artefino Fair

Founded in 2017, this artisanal craft fair celebrates local craftsmanship, sustainable fashion and community-driven enterprises; home-grown designers and small businesses showcase hand-crafted textiles, home décor and accessories.

Control + Shift: Changing Narratives Festival

Launched in 2024, this interdisciplinary festival invites audiences to reclaim Filipino stories via puppetry, movement, improvisation and digital theatre; schools, communities and institutional partners co-create performances that bridge past, present and future.

The International Silent Film Festival of Manila

Established in 2007 by Goethe Institut Philippinen, the Japan Foundation- Manila, and Instituto Cervantes, this specialist festival pairs classic silent films with original scores by local musicians; screenings across historic Manila venues foreground the city's cinematic heritage and contemporary music talent.

Gabii sa Kabilin (GSK)

The annual "Night of Heritage" (Metro Cebu) transforms museums and cultural institutions after dark; organised by RAFL, it celebrates Cebuano identity, spotlights conservation and underscores culture's role in sustainability and social cohesion.

Gandang-Ganda sa Sariling Gawa! (GGSSG!)

First held in 2018, this all-women art fair (free to all) invites female creators to sell books, zines, prints, comics and crafts; organised by Gantala Press with the CCP Intertextual Division, it champions women's voices in Philippine arts.

The Panagbenga Festival

The Panagbenga Festival, or Baguio Flower Festival, is a month-long celebration held every February in Baguio City, Philippines.

Conceptualized in 1995 to help the community recover from the 1990 Luzon earthquake, it highlights the city's floral heritage, cultural traditions, and economic vitality. The festival is renowned for its grand float parades, vibrant street dances, and community-centered events that attract both locals and visitors.

Masskara Festival

The MassKara Festival, held every October in Bacolod City, Philippines, is a world-renowned celebration of resilience, creativity, and joy. Famous for its vibrant street dances, music, and iconic smiling masks, it has earned Bacolod the nickname "City of Smiles." For over 30 years, the festival has transformed the city into a colorful spectacle, blending cultural traditions with a carnival-like atmosphere.

Programmes such as the British Council's Connections Through Culture and Asia-Europe Foundation's (ASEF) culture exchange grants have been instrumental in facilitating cross-border learning and co-productions. Future opportunities lie in expanding artist residencies, mobility grants, and co-curated showcases across Southeast Asia and the UK.

The Philippine festival scene now stands at a pivotal point: rich in cultural energy yet still reliant on year-to-year planning. Moving to three-to-five-year institutional cycles would unlock deeper social and economic returns. To get there, the sector needs:

- targeted up-skilling in production, programming, management and fundraising
- clearer talent pipelines-internships, apprenticeships and school partnerships
- flexible, multi-year funding schemes that blend public support with private investment.

If national and local policy frameworks explicitly position festivals as both cultural assets and engines of local development, organisers can professionalise, diversify revenue and sustain creative employment. With these levers in place, Philippine festivals can evolve from one-off events into enduring cultural institutions that drive inclusive growth.

Survey Headlines



Festivals typically run annually, although a few, such as Artefino, occur multiple times a year.



Key skills needs include leadership effectiveness, business planning and human-resources capacity-building.



Strategic priorities include exposure to new artistic and programming models, and building networks with international cultural institutions.



Funding is fragmented and largely sponsor-driven or self-funded, prompting most organisers to seek guidance on overseas financing models.



Photo Courtesy: Ransom Note

Case study

Malasimbo Music and Arts Festival

Facebook: facebook.com/Malasimbofestival

Instagram: [@malasimbofestival](https://instagram.com/malasimbofestival)



- ✓ Example of coupling premium acoustic technology with heritage landscapes – creating a distinctive eco-cultural visitor experience.
- ✓ Independent, globally networked programme – a stage where international icons and Filipino artists share equal billing.
- ✓ Diversified income and Asia-Pacific co-touring – cost-sharing keeps quality high, though long-term funding resilience remains critical.

The Malasimbo Music and Arts Festival is a pioneering music and art festival in the Philippines, celebrated for its seamless blend of high-quality sound, visual art, and immersive natural and heritage settings. Established in 2011, the festival presents a wide range of genres including jazz, soul, funk, electronic, world music, and indigenous sounds. Its programming includes performances, visual art installations, workshops, and talks, offering audiences an experience that bridges creativity, community, and nature.

“You cannot put up a concert on a flat field—sound dissipates!”

— Miro Grgić. Founder of Malasimbo Music and Arts Festival

The festival is founded and led by Croatian-born sound engineer Miro Grgić. Due to the conflict in the former Yugoslavia, Miro and his family moved to Australia when he was 15. He later worked professionally as a sound engineer and eventually relocated to the Philippines, where he served as Sofitel’s director of entertainment. Miro’s motivation to create Malasimbo is rooted in his deep love of music and a near-scientific commitment to perfecting live sound. His knowledge of acoustics and sound design drives Malasimbo’s reputation for sonic excellence.

Malasimbo’s unique contribution as a festival has a cultural, environmental and economic angle. First is its exceptional sound quality (e.g. Funktion-One systems) and high-quality music programming, achieved through the organisers’ expertise in sound engineering and global music network. Additionally, by placing performances in forests, parks, and gardens with amphitheatre-like settings, the festival gives audiences unforgettable experiences through music, art and positive interactions with nature.

Each venue is carefully chosen based on strong partnerships and acoustic integrity. From its original home on the slopes of Mt. Malasimbo in Puerto Galera, the festival moved to La Mesa Eco Park in collaboration with ABS-CBN Foundation, and in 2025 relaunched at Puerta Real Gardens in Intramuros, Manila.

Malasimbo has hosted acclaimed international artists including Omar MBE (UK), Goldie MBE (UK), Mad Professor (UK), FKJ (France), Jimmy Cliff (Jamaica), Joss Stone (UK), Jordan Rakei (Australia/UK), and Jacob Collier (UK), some of whom performed at the festival during key moments in their careers. Filipino artists such as Grace Nono, IV of Spades, and Cynthia Alexander have also featured prominently, showcasing Malasimbo's role in supporting both local talent and international artistry. Audiences span ages 25–45 and include families and visitors from more than 45 countries across Asia, the Middle East, Europe, and the Americas.

From 2011 to 2016, Malasimbo received support from DOT with the belief that the festival positions the Philippines as an attractive cultural destination. With the withdrawal of this support due to changing administrations and rising production costs, the festival went on hiatus during the pandemic. It returned in 2025 with a one-day edition backed by Salmon Group, a financial services firm, and launched in partnership with Rolling Stone Philippines as its official media partner. Although heavy rains and flooding forced the cancellation of the original event date, a rescheduled edition four weeks later drew strong attendance.

Malasimbo's business model is based on a diversified funding mix: 20–50% from ticket sales and earned income, 20–50% from private sponsors, and less than 20% from government support and digital fundraising. While ticket sales have remained robust, long-term financial sustainability remains a key challenge, particularly the need for consistent, multi-year funding to support planning and growth. As with many outdoor festivals, Malasimbo also faces risks linked to weather and environmental conditions, which can impact operations and revenue.

To manage the high costs of international programming, Malasimbo collaborates with regional festivals such as Java Jazz (Indonesia), Womadelaide (Australia), and Billboard Live (Japan).

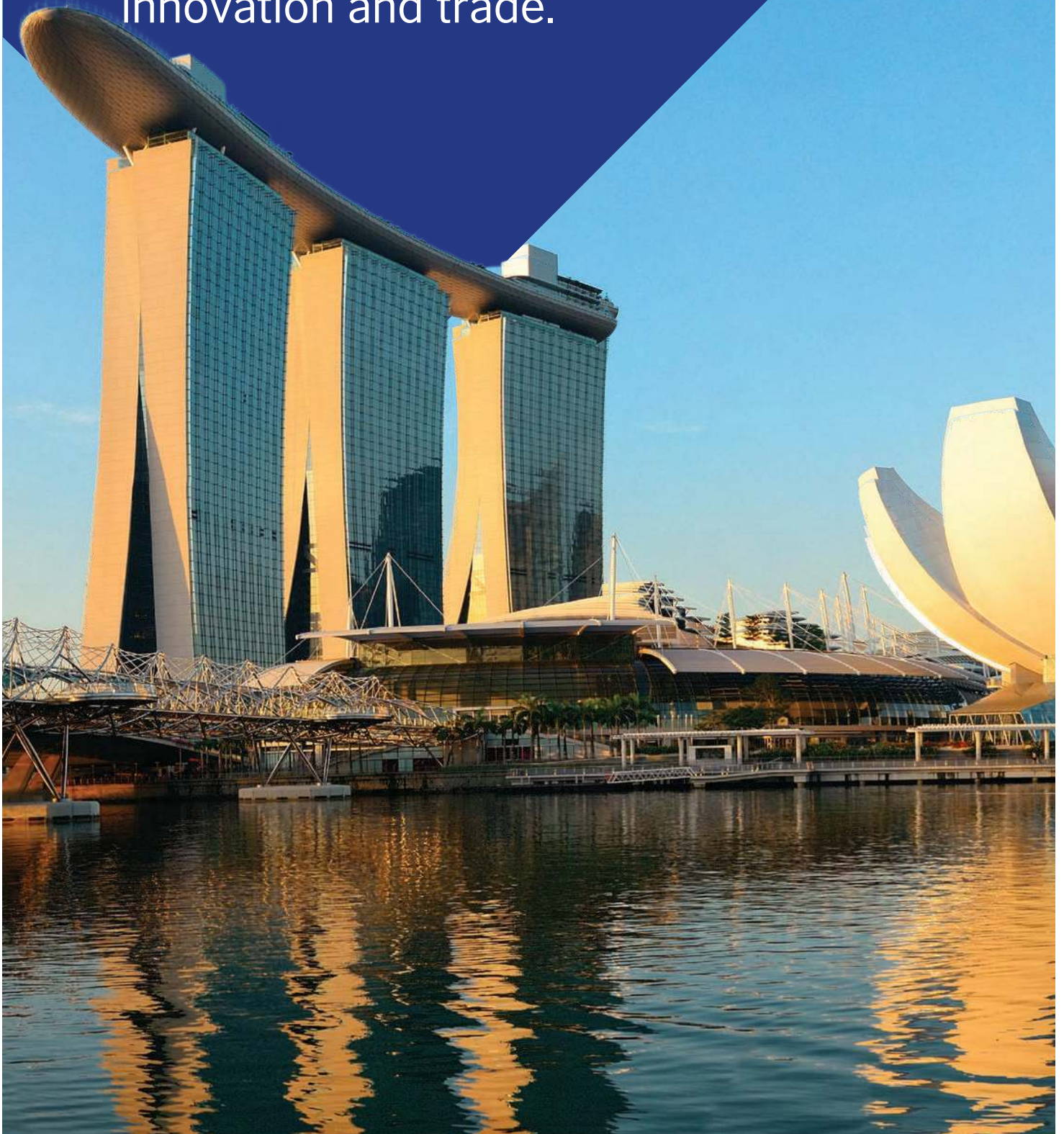
By aligning its schedule with other festivals in the Asia-Pacific region, typically in late May, it is able to share touring artists and logistics, helping reduce costs and expand access to top international acts.

Malasimbo continues to operate as a largely independent initiative led by Miro, with help from a small circle of industry friends. Looking ahead, he plans to establish a Malasimbo Foundation to support under-resourced Filipino musicians and artists by providing studio access, talent development, and year-round creative opportunities beyond the festival itself.

- ✓ Opportunity to scale international collaboration and audience outreach – through artist exchanges, co-productions and joint programming.
- ✓ Platform to scale world-class sound-engineering expertise – offering Malasimbo-branded masterclasses, certification programmes and consultancy services.
- ✓ Ambition to diversify and stabilize funding streams - opportunity for long-term public-private funding partnerships.

Singapore

Globally facing festival scene,
combining creative excellence,
innovation and trade.



Overview

Singapore is a compact island city-state located at the crossroads of Southeast Asia. Despite its small size, it is a global hub for trade, innovation, and cultural exchange. With a population of over 5.5 million, it is home to a diverse society shaped by Chinese, Malay, Indian, and other communities. This multicultural foundation, combined with world-class infrastructure and strong institutional support for the arts, provides fertile ground for a dynamic and globally connected festival landscape—positioning Singapore as both a regional centre for creativity and a gateway to wider Asia and the world.

“A single big stadium show can drain so much attention and spending that it ends up hurting the entire ecosystem.”

— Arin Sharnaz Rashdi, CEO/Founder of
Tala Records Asia

Cultural context

Singapore’s cultural policy landscape is strategically aligned with its national ambitions to be a Global-Asia hub for innovation, technology, and enterprise. Within this vision, the creative economy is seen as a key driver of economic growth, job creation, and social cohesion. Cultural development is not approached as a standalone sector but as an integrated pillar of national development—woven into policies on education, urban planning, digital transformation, and international trade.

The cultural ecosystem is characterised by strong institutional coordination. Key agencies such as the National Arts Council, Infocomm Media Development Authority, DesignSingapore Council, the National Heritage Board (NHB), and the Ministry of Culture,

Community and Youth work together to design policy, distribute funding, and implement programmes that support artistic production, innovation, and outreach. A distinctive feature of Singapore’s model is the way in which creativity is intentionally embedded across sectors—from design and media to heritage and placemaking—reinforcing the arts as part of a broader societal infrastructure.

Recent strategies, such as the SG Arts Plan (2023–2027), reflect a focus on access, integration, and internationalisation. The Plan promotes arts engagement across all life stages, supports diverse forms of cultural participation, and seeks to activate physical and virtual spaces through artistic intervention. This includes using arts to strengthen identity and social bonds, while simultaneously investing in talent development and global positioning. Projects that integrate arts into malls, housing estates, and public precincts—often in collaboration with residents and businesses—are part of a wider effort to ensure that arts and culture are both visible and embedded in everyday life.

Within this broader policy and institutional environment, festivals play an important role as public-facing platforms for creative expression, community engagement, and cultural innovation. The evolving festival landscape in Singapore offers a window into how these national priorities are being translated into lived experiences—across neighbourhoods, disciplines, and audiences.

Festival landscape

Singapore’s festival landscape is vibrant, diverse, and continually evolving—positioning the nation as a regional hub for cultural exchange, creative innovation and trade. From contemporary arts showcases and youth-led initiatives to heritage-based and interdisciplinary festivals, the

ecosystem reflects Singapore's cosmopolitan identity and commitment to cultural participation.

Festivals are delivered by a wide range of organisers, including government bodies, non-profit foundations, and private-public collaborations. Programming tends to be led by in-house curatorial teams, with some also incorporating open calls or co-created elements involving communities and partners. This blend of approaches allows for both artistic direction and inclusive engagement.

Singapore's music festival landscape has undergone notable shifts in recent years. Following the pandemic, large-scale EDM events have gained prominence, supported by their cost-efficiency, straightforward logistics, and strong sponsor interest. This trend reflects a broader recalibration in the sector, where formats that are commercially agile have found more room to grow. At the same time, the evolution presents an opportunity to reflect on how a more diverse mix of festival models—including independent and genre-blending formats—might continue to contribute to the richness of the overall ecosystem.

Events take place across a variety of spaces, from iconic national venues such as Esplanade - Theatres by the Bay to museums, outdoor parks, mixed-use urban areas and online platforms. This flexibility supports innovation and experimentation, though access to high-profile venues can present cost-related challenges without sponsorship or in-kind support. As Singapore continues to build its profile as a regional creative hub, with strategy and investment constantly realigned to give competitive edge, festival organisers note that audience attention can be difficult to sustain in a city with a wide array of entertainment options. Convenience and proximity are key considerations—audiences may hesitate to travel longer distances for smaller or independent

events, even as they show strong interest in major cultural happenings¹³.

Regulatory processes are generally navigable, and some festival teams have reported productive engagement with public agencies around safety and event planning. At the same time, logistical constraints such as venue requirements can influence the creative and operational choices available to festival makers.

Sustainability has become an increasingly important priority. Organisers are exploring more environmentally conscious practices, from the use of solar-powered systems to low-impact infrastructure. While full transition to sustainable models remains a work in progress, there is a growing commitment to integrating environmental responsibility into festival production. Some prefer the term “conscious consumption,” acknowledging the sector's current reliance on traditional energy sources while actively seeking viable alternatives.

In sum, Singapore's festivals are shaped by a spirit of experimentation, collaboration, and resilience. They are central to nation building and genuine catalysts and platforms for the creative economy, with Singapore retaining its role as the region's number one creative marketplace (although its role is far less dominant with the rise of other major centres). Despite the pressures of a competitive and expensive cultural environment, the sector continues to adapt and innovate—contributing meaningfully to Singapore's cultural identity and regional influence.

“People hesitate to take a 45-minute bus ride to the festival venue, even though they'd take a similar journey to Changi Airport, and then hop on a 3hr flight to another festival.”

— Jake Camacho, co-founder of Sunda Festival, Ice Cream Sundays, Nomad Solar Sound.

¹³ Pedro Gonçalves, “Sunda Festival 2025: Two Friends Shaping Singapore's Music and Festival Scene,” City Nomads, April 1, 2025.

Available at: <https://citynomads.com/sunda-festival-2025-two-friends-shaping-singapores-music-and-festival-scene/>

Funding dynamics

Healthy funding remains a central pillar of Singapore's festival ecosystem, with government support playing a key enabling role across many initiatives. Public funding is often the foundation for programming and operations, particularly for festivals that align with cultural development goals or national narratives. In addition to this, some festivals have successfully attracted corporate sponsorships and private donations, especially when they are able to demonstrate strong audience engagement or brand visibility. Ticket sales, merchandise, and small-scale commercial activities also contribute, though they tend to supplement rather than sustain core operations.

At the same time, festival organisers point to the challenges of securing consistent, long-term funding. Project-based grants can limit the ability to plan beyond a single edition or invest in institutional growth. There is interest in exploring more diverse income strategies-from educational partnerships to community support-but these often require additional resources and capacity. Some respondents also note that competition for sponsorship is high and typically favours more established or mainstream events.

Despite these pressures, there is a strong sense of adaptability within the sector. Festival organisers are actively seeking innovative models that balance public and private support, while remaining attentive to the values and creative vision of their festivals. The shift toward resilience and financial sustainability is ongoing, supported by a growing recognition of the broader value festivals bring to Singapore's cultural and social fabric.

Skills development initiatives

Skills development in Singapore's festival sector tends to occur through a mix of formal and informal pathways. Many organisers emphasise learning by doing, with interns, volunteers, and

junior staff gaining practical experience through festival production. Some festivals have established partnerships with educational institutions, providing students with hands-on opportunities to contribute to programming, logistics, and creative content. In addition, several initiatives offer community workshops or mentorship schemes, helping to build confidence and capacity among emerging creatives. These efforts are complemented by broader national frameworks-such as the Our SG Arts Plan and NAC-led capability-building programmes-which aim to strengthen skills across artistic, technical, and entrepreneurial areas.

Local skills needs and impact

While there is a foundation for learning in place, organisers point to the need of more structured and sustained development pathways - particularly in non-artistic areas. Skills in production management, marketing, digital strategy, audience development, and leadership are increasingly seen as essential to running sustainable, high-impact festivals. There is also growing interest in cross-sector skills, including placemaking, environmental design, and digital innovation, especially as Singapore expands its ambitions in immersive and metaverse-based experiences. Strengthening these areas could enhance the resilience of the sector and ensure that creative professionals are equipped to thrive in a competitive and rapidly evolving cultural landscape.

International collaboration potential

Singapore is well-positioned to strengthen its role as a regional hub for international cultural collaboration. As a globalised, multicultural city-state with strong institutional frameworks and a strategic location in Southeast Asia, it offers a stable and well-connected platform for cross-border exchange. The country's ambition to be a Global-Asia node for innovation and enterprise is reflected in cultural policy as well, with initiatives

participation in overseas events. Additionally, Singapore's reputation for high production standards, regulatory efficiency, and digital readiness makes it an attractive partner for international festivals, networks, and funders.

From the ground level, festival organisers have expressed interest in deepening global connections, particularly in areas such as co-curation, artist exchange, and collaborative programming. There is recognition that international partnerships can help diversify content, expand audiences, and introduce new ways of working. However, access to such opportunities may vary depending on the scale and visibility of the festival. Independent and emerging festivals in particular may benefit from targeted support to overcome cost and capacity barriers to international engagement. Overall,

Singapore's combination of infrastructure, policy support, and regional positioning provides a solid foundation for meaningful and mutually beneficial international collaborations-particularly with Southeast Asia and the wider Asia-Pacific region.

Survey Headlines



Festivals are professional, hybrid, and integrated into national cultural policy.



Key skills needs are audience data, digital innovation, and cross-sector



Strategic priorities include inclusion, talent development, and regional collaboration.



Funding is diversified, with strong public investment and private co-funding.

Festivals to Watch

Singapore's festival calendar spans literary, performing arts, heritage, design, and industry events—showcasing local talent, encouraging international exchange, and driving creative innovation. Below are some standout festivals that shape its cultural landscape. While this list showcases selected examples, it is by no means exhaustive and does not capture the full breadth of Singapore's cultural calendar and festival landscape.

Singapore Writers Festival

Held annually each November, this flagship literary festival brings together authors, poets, and thinkers from around the world to share stories, spark dialogue, and celebrate the art of the written word through readings, panel discussions, and community outreach.

Singapore International Festival of Arts (SIFA)

SIFA is a multidisciplinary arts festival each May that commissions and presents theatre, dance, music, and visual-arts performances, blending local creativity with international collaborations to push the boundaries of contemporary art.

Singapore Biennale

The Singapore Biennale, founded in 2006, is a leading platform for international contemporary art. It situates the work of Singaporean and regional artists within a global conversation, fostering exchange and collaboration across borders. Through its programmes, the Biennale cultivates sustained engagement with artists and artistic communities, nationally and internationally.

Sunda Festival

Sunda Festival in Singapore is an alternative music festival featuring music, dance, wellness experiences, interactive installations, and workshops, all presented in relaxed, open-air settings, along with food offerings.

Singapore Design Week

Singapore Design Week is one of Asia's foremost design festivals. Held annually, it highlights the creativity of designers from Singapore and around the world through exhibitions, installations, talks and immersive experiences.

Singapore Art Week

Each January, Singapore Art Week activates galleries, museums, and public spaces with exhibitions, artist talks, and interactive installations, spotlighting contemporary visual art and design while encouraging cross-disciplinary collaboration.

Singapore HeritageFest

HeritageFest brings Singapore's history to life with living-history performances, heritage tours, and community workshops, engaging audiences in the stories behind historic neighbourhoods, traditions, and local crafts.

Singapore Night Festival

Held in early August in the Bras Basah–Bugis district, this two-weekend nocturnal arts festival features light installations, projections, heritage tours, and street performances, transforming urban landmarks into a glowing canvas of creativity.



Case study

Sunda Festival

Facebook: facebook.com/sunda.festival/

Instagram: [@sunda.festival](https://www.instagram.com/sunda.festival)



- ✓ Example of a festival integrating culture with social and environmental themes – weaving music, wellness and sustainability dialogues into core programming.
- ✓ Proactive youth engagement in curation and production .
- ✓ Collaborative ecosystem supporting artists, collectives and local enterprise – fostering cross-sector partnerships and co-creation opportunities.

The Sunda Festival is a contemporary cultural and music event based in Singapore that brings together sound, wellness, movement, and craft in a multi-sensory format. It positions itself at the intersection of creativity, community, and conscious living. Now in its third edition, Sunda is one of Singapore's newest festivals and is already gaining recognition for its curation of diverse and forward-facing programming rooted in Southeast Asian culture and nature.

The festival is co-founded and organised by Daniel O'Connor and Jake Camacho, the duo behind Ice Cream Sundays, a Singapore-based events collective known for its alternative music events in unconventional venues. They are joined by collaborators Meltem Acik and Nick Bong, who contribute to the festival's diverse programming and community engagement.

Drawing inspiration from the Malay Archipelago - "Nusantara" - both in spirit and in name, Sunda blends high-calibre regional music with wellness experiences, interactive installations, and workshops, all presented in relaxed, open-air settings.

Its 2025 edition was held across two distinct venues: Somerset Skate Park and Pasir Panjang Power Station, reflecting a commitment to bringing cultural experiences into urban and industrial heritage spaces.

Music is central to Sunda's identity, with line-ups curated to reflect both regional underground scenes and pan-Asian contemporary sounds. The 2025 edition featured acts such as A'alely, Bongomann, Dharma (a founding member of legendary Singaporean band The Observatory), and Indonesia's Midnight Runners.

The emphasis on live acts, DJs, and collectives from Southeast Asia is part of a wider mission to spotlight regional talent in a city often dominated by international headline bookings.

More than just a music event, Sunda integrates wellness programming, from yoga and sound baths to movement-based workshops. There are also sessions that explore sustainability, mental health, and ancestral knowledge, reflecting a holistic understanding of culture and community. This multi-dimensional approach attracts a wide demographic, including young adults, cultural workers, and families seeking alternative, creative, and community-based experiences.

The organisers' choice of venues is deliberate. Pasir Panjang Power Station, a decommissioned industrial building,

provided a dramatic backdrop for music and movement, allowing artists and festival-goers to reimagine the potential of Singapore's built environment. In contrast, Somerset Skate Park - an active youth space - hosted music and movement events geared towards younger audiences and street culture communities. The use of public and underutilised spaces supports Sunda's ethos of cultural activation and accessibility.

Sunda's format is collaborative. It acts as a platform for collectives, performers, and small businesses, with curated markets and F&B partners from across Singapore and the region. This reflects a broader ecosystem approach, where culture, commerce, and creativity intersect. Workshops range from silk-screening and candle-making to batik and traditional herbal remedies, contributing to a deeper connection between cultural expression and everyday life.

In addition, Sunda has shown a strong commitment to youth engagement and emerging talent. By involving younger creative leaders in its curation and production teams, and partnering with platforms like Hear65 (an initiative supported by the National Arts Council), the festival offers a space for creative experimentation and mentorship, while amplifying Singaporean and Southeast Asian voices.

As one of the few large-scale, independently produced street festivals in Singapore, Sunda reflects a growing desire for grassroots-led cultural production in the city. With limited government support, Sunda relies on partnerships with venue operators, independent media, and private sponsors to bring its vision to life.

Looking ahead, the organisers are considering regional partnerships and artist residencies that align with Sunda's values - environmentally conscious, artist-led, and rooted in regional culture. There is also potential to explore touring editions across Southeast Asia or create exchange platforms where musicians and artists can co-create and perform beyond borders.

Sunda Festival illustrates a new cultural logic in Singapore - one that is more horizontal, collaborative, and conscious of place. Rather than exporting a singular national brand, it draws on the region's shared cultural flows to co-create new narratives. With its emphasis on collective experience, rootedness in the region, and creative reimagining of public space, Sunda is helping to reshape how festivals are conceived and experienced in Singapore and beyond.



- ✓ Opportunity to establish eco-conscious, artist-led regional partnerships and residencies across Southeast Asia – enabling touring editions and cross-border co-creation.
- ✓ Platform to integrate socio-environmental narratives – embedding sustainability, wellness and ancestral knowledge into core programming.
- ✓ Transform underutilised urban spaces into vibrant cultural nodes – repurposing industrial and public venues for immersive festival experiences.

Thailand

Diverse, dynamic,
transformational festivals



Overview

Thailand is a geographically diverse country located in mainland Southeast Asia, bordered by Myanmar, Lao PDR, Cambodia, and Malaysia. With a population of over 66 million, Thailand is predominantly Thai-speaking and Buddhist, though it is home to a range of ethnic communities and regional identities that contribute to its cultural vibrancy. Bangkok, the capital, serves as both the political and creative heart of the nation—anchoring a broader ecosystem that spans rural festivals, craft traditions, and emerging digital scenes. This blend of heritage and innovation makes Thailand a key player in the region's cultural and creative economy.

Cultural context

Thailand's cultural landscape is rooted in a deep intertwining of tradition, spirituality, and creativity—reflected in its rituals, crafts, performance forms, and community-based artistic practices. From classical dance and temple murals to contemporary design and pop music, cultural expression is a visible and valued part of everyday life.

This richness supports not only national identity but also Thailand's ambition to position itself as a regional leader in the creative economy. The creative industries are increasingly recognised as a driver of inclusive growth, with government strategies focused on digital innovation, cultural entrepreneurship, and global competitiveness.

Policy support has expanded in recent years through institutions such as the Creative Economy Agency (CEA), which promotes cross-sector collaboration, and through alignment with international frameworks such as the OECD Declaration on the Future of the Creative Economy. Cultural development is also linked to

tourism, education, and soft power diplomacy, with particular emphasis on promoting Thai design, food, and performing arts. The UNESCO Creative Cities programme has acted as a catalyst for festival development across Thailand, with some festivals born to support bids to become a Creative City and/or as part of Creative City programming. Sectors such as design, crafts/folk arts and music have been prioritised in terms of festival programming linked to the UNESCO Creative Cities Programme.

However, infrastructure and support systems remain unevenly distributed across regions, and much of the cultural activity is driven by independent practitioners and local communities. Within this broader context, festivals are emerging as key platforms for experimentation, talent showcasing, and international engagement—offering insight into how Thailand's creative ambitions are being enacted on the ground.

Festival landscape

Thailand's festival landscape is vibrant, decentralised, and artist-driven—shaped by a strong independent spirit and a growing interest in cultural expression among younger audiences. From interdisciplinary art events to design fairs, music gatherings, and contemporary visual showcases, festivals in Thailand reflect a dynamic interplay between creative experimentation, social engagement, and evolving audience behaviours.

Loei Art Fes aims to be a transformative space where art reconnects people with nature, inspires well-being, and sparks critical reflection on the environmental and social changes shaping our lives.

— Wayla Amatathamachad Director
Loei Art Fes

Most festivals are curated in-house, with some incorporating open calls or working with guest producers. Beyond performances and exhibitions, festivals commonly feature talks, workshops, marketplaces, and social gatherings-creating formats which blend cultural content with participatory, lifestyle, and civic dimensions. Residencies and research-based formats, however, remain rare, pointing to an area of future potential.

Social media plays a key role in audience outreach, but deeper digital transformation is still emerging. Festivals are widely present on platforms like Facebook and Instagram, where they engage with young, urban audiences. However, few festivals fully integrate digital tools into their programming, fundraising, or distribution strategies. Online components-while growing in popularity-are often treated as auxiliary rather than core to the festival experience.

Thailand's festivals are navigating a fragmented and often precarious funding environment. Public funding remains an important pillar for some, particularly where alignment with creative economy agendas exists. Yet many organisers rely heavily on private sponsorship, donations, and income from markets or booths, rather than ticket sales or long-term grant mechanisms. This makes strategic planning, infrastructure development, and scale-up efforts difficult to sustain.

Gender representation within the festival sector is notably progressive. Women are strongly represented in leadership, curatorial, and management roles, and many festivals are shaped by female-led teams. However, broader inclusion-especially of people with disabilities or ethnic and religious minorities-remains limited.

While some festivals are beginning to address these gaps, there is a clear opportunity for more structural approaches to equity, access, and representation.

Programming approaches are diverse and increasingly reflective of contemporary concerns. Audiences tend to be young, sociable, and open to new experiences. Festivals attract university students, emerging professionals, and culturally curious publics, many of whom are not artists themselves but attend for learning, inspiration, or social participation. Organisers are increasingly prioritising audience development, particularly around attracting first-time visitors and sustaining engagement with returning participants. Local engagement is also a key ambition, though its realisation varies depending on location and festival capacity.

The festival sector shows strong creative and growth potential but needs targeted support to thrive. Festival organisers consistently express the need for capacity building in areas such as strategic development, marketing, digital innovation, and cross-sector collaboration. Festivals are often deeply embedded in their communities, yet lack the visibility, partnerships, and resources required to scale their impact or connect with regional and international opportunities.

In essence, Thailand's festivals are shaped by resilience, experimentation, and grassroots leadership. They offer powerful entry points into contemporary Thai culture and represent a valuable resource for civic engagement, cultural diplomacy, and creative industries development. With greater structural investment and international connection, the sector is well-placed to play a more visible and strategic role in Southeast Asia's evolving cultural landscape.

Funding dynamics

Funding for festivals in Thailand is characterised by a mixed economy, combining public support, private sponsorship, and commercial activity. While government funding remains a key source—especially for festivals aligned with national creative economy goals—many organisers also mobilise support from corporate sponsors, donors, and local businesses. Participation fees for marketplace stalls, booths, or exhibitions provide another income stream, particularly for design, craft, and visual arts festivals. Most events are free to attend, reflecting a commitment to public access, though ticketed models are occasionally used in specific sectors such as performing arts. This hybrid approach, while sometimes unpredictable, enables a degree of flexibility and independence, allowing festivals to experiment with form, scale, and content even in resource-constrained settings.

At the same time, funding remains a key concern for long-term sustainability. Few festivals benefit from multi-year support or structured grant programmes, and many operate without consistent financial planning or back-office capacity. This can limit investment in infrastructure, staffing, and international partnerships. However, there is growing interest among organisers in building more resilient models—through audience-driven revenue, collaborative funding approaches, and stronger articulation of social and cultural value. With targeted support in financial management and donor engagement, Thailand's festivals are well-positioned to diversify their income streams and reinforce their role as creative and civic platforms.

Skills development initiatives

Skills development within Thailand's festival ecosystem largely takes place through informal, practice-based approaches. Many organisers rely on hands-on experience, with part-time staff, volunteers, and freelance collaborators gaining

exposure through direct involvement in festival production, curation, and logistics. While formal training initiatives remain limited, some festivals engage with local educational institutions or arts networks to offer internships or collaborative opportunities.

In addition, some include workshops and panel discussions within their programming, which—although primarily public-facing—also contributes to broader learning and exchange. This emphasis on embedded learning reflects the resource constraints of many festivals, but also their adaptability and openness to community participation.

Local skills needs and impact

Thailand's festival sector demonstrates strong artistic and curatorial capacity, with most festivals led by in-house teams that shape distinctive programming across contemporary and interdisciplinary forms. However, many festivals operate with limited internal structures, relying heavily on volunteers, freelance contributors, and short-term part-time staff—which can constrain long-term planning and institutional learning.

As digital engagement becomes increasingly important, festivals face challenges in building capacity for content creation, online outreach, and hybrid formats. Communication, production logistics, and audience development are additional areas where festival organisers express the need for deeper expertise. Addressing these gaps could enable festivals to strengthen their operational resilience and broaden their impact, particularly as they seek to engage wider publics and explore new models of sustainability.

"We aim to harness digital tools to expand our reach and deepen audience engagement"

— Festival organiser (anonymous)

International collaboration potential

Thailand's festival ecosystem has strong foundations for international collaboration, particularly through its engagement with creative networks and cross-border cultural initiatives. A number of festivals are already active in regional and global circuits-participating in platforms such as UNESCO Creative Cities, World Design Weeks, and ASEAN-linked networks. These affiliations serve multiple purposes: enabling artistic and curatorial exchange, attracting international audiences, supporting emerging talent, and fostering long-term partnerships between creative professionals and communities.

While many festivals continue to operate independently, those that are networked see

internationalisation as a pathway toward increased visibility, resource diversification, and sector growth. Interest is growing in collaborations that span Southeast Asia and beyond, including co-productions, artist exchanges, and shared programming. With strategic support, particularly round mobility, fundraising, and project development, Thailand is well-positioned to amplify its regional presence and play a more connected role in the global creative economy.

“In the future we hope for more collaborations and mutual growth among our partnered performing art communities in ASEAN.”

— Festival organiser (anonymous).

Survey Headlines



Festivals span art, film, and music, blending traditional and contemporary forms with strong social and civic missions.



Key skills needs include leadership, fundraising, team management, and digital production.



Strategic priorities include decentralization, youth engagement, and creative education.



Funding is fragmented, relying heavily on sponsorship, self-funding, and underdeveloped public support.

Festivals to Watch

Thailand's festival landscape is diverse and regionally rooted, blending traditional culture with contemporary expression. The following festivals illustrate this breadth-showcasing distinctive voices, creative formats, and locally grounded visions that together shape Thailand's evolving cultural ecosystem. UNESCO Creative Cities have proved fruitful contexts for festival development. For example, Bangkok and Chiang Rai - UNESCO Cities of Design; Chiang Mai and Sukhothai - UNESCO Cities of Crafts and Folk Art; and Suphan Buri - UNESCO City of Music. While this list showcases selected examples, it is by no means exhaustive and does not capture the full breadth of Thailand's cultural calendar and festival landscape.

Loei Art Fes

Held annually in Loei Province, Loei Art Fes harnesses contemporary art and local wisdom to foster community well-being and reconnect people with nature. The festival features installations, live demonstrations, and participatory workshops that promote sustainable cultural development and inspire rural revitalization in northeastern Thailand.

Phrae Craft

Taking place in Phrae each year, Phrae Craft gathers master artisans and aspiring creators to celebrate traditional handicrafts. Through craft demonstrations, hands-on workshops, and mentorship programs, the festival aims to preserve local techniques while inspiring a new generation of skilled craftsmen.

Bangkok International Performing Arts Meeting (BIPAM)

BIPAM convenes twice a year in Bangkok to bridge Southeast Asian performing-arts professionals with international networks. The meeting includes panel discussions, showcases, and collaborative labs, fostering critical discourse and strengthening regional connections to elevate Southeast Asian voices on the global stage.

HOM0HAUS

Founded in June 2024, HOM0HAUS is Bangkok's queer performance-art festival championing gender-diverse voices and anti-patriarchal discourse. Through experimental theatre, dance, and live art, the festival creates inclusive, democratic platforms for emerging non-heteronormative creators, revitalizing the city's art scene with bold, critical expression.

Bangkok Design Week

Held each February in the city's creative districts, Bangkok Design Week showcases the capital's vibrant design scene through exhibitions, interactive installations, and public workshops. The festival highlights experimental and socially impactful works, promoting innovative ideas that reflect Bangkok's evolving urban identity and creative potential.

Bangkok Music City

Held in Bangkok's creative districts, Bangkok Music City is a music-industry and public-facing event that showcases Thailand's vibrant music scene. The festival features live performances across genres, industry panels, networking sessions, and masterclasses for songwriters, producers, and managers. By bringing together local artists, international delegates, and music professionals, Bangkok Music City positions the capital as a regional music hub and fosters collaboration, education, and innovation within Thailand's music industry.

Chiang Mai Design Week

Held annually in Chiang Mai's vibrant Nimmanhaemin and around the Old City, Chiang Mai Design Week is a multi-disciplinary celebration of creativity, innovation, and community engagement. The week-long festival features street installations, gallery exhibitions, pop-up markets, and interactive workshops that highlight architecture, product design, sustainable practices, and digital innovation. By activating public spaces-laneways, parks, and historic buildings-CMDW showcases local and international designers' works, encourages hands-on learning, and fosters collaboration between creatives, businesses, and the wider community, positioning Chiang Mai as a leading design hub in Southeast Asia.

Sound of Sisaket

Sound of Sisaket celebrates the city's cultural diversity through music, film screenings, and community-led performances. Positioned as a creative hub in northeastern Thailand, the festival empowers local talent, blends traditional heritage with contemporary innovation, and invites visitors to experience Sisaket's emerging artistic pulse.

ALaLa Dance Fest

Staged annually in Chiang Mai, ALaLa Dance Fest serves as a platform for cultural exchange under the theme "Heritage Roots." The festival features ethnic dance performances, collaborative workshops, and community engagement activities that connect artists and audiences through shared experiences of heritage and contemporary expression.

Suphan Soul Festival

Held at the Wat Sanam Chai Archaeological Site in Suphan Buri, Suphan Soul Festival celebrates local heritage through live music, traditional dance performances, and community arts workshops. The festival features regional bands, folk-dance troupes, and craft demonstrations, creating a vibrant cultural experience that honors Suphan Buri's artistic traditions.

Wonderfruit

Held each December in Pattaya, Wonderfruit is a four-day celebration of music, arts, wellness, and sustainability. The festival features international and local musicians across multiple stages, immersive art installations, farm-to-table dining experiences, and eco-conscious workshops, all set within a purpose-built, off-grid environment that champions regenerative living.



Case study

Musical Performance during Sound of Sisaket Festival.

Photo courtesy of Wadnam Janpoung

Sound of Sisaket Festival

Facebook: facebook.com/sound.of.sisaket/

Website: <https://sisaketmusiccity.com/>

- ✓ Example of a festival driving a city's wider social and economic strategy – as a beacon of renewal.
- ✓ Strong public / private partnerships, with the Chamber of Commerce a key champion.
- ✓ Diverse and changing programme – to reflect the city's cultural diversity and the interface between traditional and contemporary practices.

The Sound of Sisaket Festival is a fast-growing and ambitious music-based festival in Sisaket, a town and province in Thailand's northeastern region of Isan. Launched in 2022, and held annually ever since, the festival is positioned as a strategic catalyst for economic diversification, social renewal and city branding. It is supported through a public-private partnership which includes the municipality (as the key enabler for the festival), the Chamber of Commerce, and a range of sponsors. Sisaket is one of Thailand's least prosperous cities and it struggles to attract and retain talent across all sectors. Sisaket is also one of Thailand's most culturally distinctive cities, with a substantial Khmer, Suai, Yer and Lao minority, as well as the majority Thai population. This diversity is showcased through the types of musical instruments used in the festival's music showcases, as well as through a programme of dance performances, musical showcases, and the types of food and crafts sold at the Festival.

The Sound of Sisaket Festival is viewed as key to the city's renewal, as explained by Mr. Rattawit Angkhasakulkiat, Chairman of the Sisaket Chamber of Commerce and a co-leader of the Festival:

“Sisaket was once considered a less prosperous province and not a key economic city. We aim to transform this by building a new cultural economy.”

The Festival began life as a specialist 'Marching Band' festival, attracting marching bands from different regions and internationally. This remains a key feature of the Festival, with visiting marching bands and associated exchange and training activities. This involves a partnership with the International Marching Band Association. However, the Festival has diversified beyond this core offer and is now genuinely interdisciplinary, including film-making and screening, visual arts, handicrafts and multiple connected smaller-scale events. The Festival, held over four days in

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The Festival seeks to showcase the city’s and region’s unique cultural heritage, as well as conveying their contemporary dynamism and relevance. There is also an emphasis on contemporary production and presentation – in music, film and in the stalls and events which showcase visual arts, design and crafts. The Festival makes the connection between the region’s distinctive traditions and the ways they are changing to generate new narratives, aesthetics and art forms:

“We have a unique style of music and language...we are not Chiang Mai, Bangkok or Phuket, but we want to make the city so lovely through culture, with the festival to its heart”

– Rattawit Angkhasakulkiat

Running alongside it each December is the Thailand World Music Championships (WMC), an international competition that has been held in Sisaket for over 14 years. Though independently organised, the two events often intersect-through joint parades, shared performers, and collaborative showcases-reflecting a spirit of partnership that builds local capacity and reinforces Sisaket’s emerging role as a centre for musical exchange.

The Festival incorporates a training and capacity-building element – to support local cultural practitioners to develop new products, which are presented in the Festival’s markets. It also includes partnerships with Universities – to connect festival programming to research and capacity-building on distinctive regional cultures.

For example, the Festival kickstarted a Music Research Project with Sisaket Rajabhat University. This has involved a Learning Management Model for Performing Arts Based on a STEAM Design Process, and a set of research and development activities on the role of traditional fabrics and their incorporation into performing arts activities.

The music component of the Festival is diversifying, with contemporary music programming which showcases local and national talent, showcases of traditional music, and of course the marching band element.



Artist performing during Sound of Sisaket Festival. Photo courtesy of Wadnam Janpoung.

Looking to the future, organisers and partners want to boost the profile and impact of the Festival to drive the city’s wider renewal – reputationally, economically and culturally. This includes plans to become a UNESCO Creative City, to boost opportunities for creative enterprises and cultural producers, and to enhance the overall production quality and experience of the Festival. There is also an ambition to increase international programming and initiate residency and exchange activities.

- ✓ Opportunity to boost international collaboration and exchange – in programming, capacity-building and residencies.
- ✓ Growing platform to explore the intercultural Thai cultural practices – drawing on influences from multiple ethnicities.
- ✓ Big ambitions to grow the festival economy and become a UNESCO Creative City.

Timor-Leste

Emerging festival scene -
from the ground up



Overview

Timor-Leste is a young island nation in Southeast Asia, occupying the eastern half of Timor Island, the Oecusse exclave, Atauro Island and Jaco islet. Bordered by Indonesia to the west and north, and Australia across the Timor Sea to the south, its rugged interior is volcanic and tropical, with a wet season from December to May. The population of 1.34 million (2022 census) is very young (median age under 20) and growing rapidly. Its economy-pegged to the U.S. dollar-relies heavily on oil, sandalwood exports and foreign aid, with domestically minted centavo coins.

Cultural context

Fifty-four ethnolinguistic groups, two official languages (Tetum and Portuguese) and strong Catholic identity coexist with enduring animist beliefs. Sacred houses, tais textile weaving and oral traditions-inscribed by UNESCO in 2021-anchor community identity. Grounded in lulik, the Timorese belief in the sacredness of place and practice, heritage forms such as tais weaving, tulik carving and narrative music remain widely observed, their continuity aided by geographic isolation and low tourism. In Dili, post-independence collectives (notably Art Moris, Gembel and Project Montanha) are re-casting these traditions for film, visual art and new music, supported by NGOs, often with a focus on youth skills and gender inclusion.

The 2009 National Culture Policy and the 2011–30 Strategic Development Plan mandate heritage safeguarding and arts education. There is a 5% employment target for cultural sectors-signalling official recognition of culture as both a social right and economic asset.

Festival landscape

Community-led religious and seasonal celebrations remain central to cultural life, particularly in rural areas, where they express local identity and collective resilience. Rooted in lulik beliefs and aligned with the agricultural calendar, these gatherings reinforce social bonds while sustaining traditional music, dance and craft practices. Meanwhile, a new wave of multidisciplinary festivals-most less than ten years old- is slowly starting to emerge, positioning cultural events as tools for economic diversification and cultural relations.

“Timorese cultural heritage is multi-layered – a fascinating combination of traditional Timorese, Portuguese, Chinese, and Indonesian influences. (...) Cultural groups still perform traditional dances and songs and also are entertaining in new ways. Talented Timorese bands and dance groups perform in local venues and at festivals.”

— Tourism Timor-Leste

The capital city, Dili, is the epicentre of this shift, with festivals beginning to explore new cultural directions, incorporating contemporary music and visual arts, addressing themes such as environmental sustainability and reconciliation. Where partnerships with foreign diplomatic missions, commercial sponsors and diaspora networks are introducing higher production standards, limited skills training and modest levels of tourism mean the role and impact of festivals is under-leveraged. Some initiatives—most notably the Dili International Film Festival—now offer year-round residencies and mentoring, signalling a gradual transition from single-event spectacles to ecosystem building.

Boz: Eco-Conscious Festivals

The TasiFest is a commercial festival promoted by the events production company EVEN2U. Located in the Tasitolo area, its first event was in May 2024. It presents Timorese and international artists, notably from Portuguese speaking countries and Australia. Alongside music concerts, in 2024 it involved workshops and discussions, around the subject of climate change and sustainability as well as the blue economy. Counting on the support of UNDP and the Ultramarino National Bank (BNU), among others, its 2nd edition in June 2025 attracted over 20,000

Outside the capital city, regional festivals such as the Rabilau Festival in Ainaro are positioned to nurture culture-led tourism and support territorial cohesion. These events mix performance, craft markets and environmental themes, drawing small but meaningful audiences into areas with minimal formal infrastructure. In many cases volunteer labour, particularly from the diaspora, remains the decisive enabling factor.

Box: Festival Fronteira - Festivals as Agents of Peace and Reconciliation

Organised by the National Centre Chega for memory and reconciliation, the Border Festival is an annual cultural gathering (in its second edition), designed to foster reconciliation and cultural exchange between Timor-Leste and Indonesia's western border communities.

"Arts and cultural performances, seminars and dialogues are at the heart of this festival's mission to enhance reconciliation between Timor-Leste and Indonesia."

-Hugo Maria Fernandes, Executive Director of Festival Fronteira

In its inaugural 2023 edition (15–18 November, Bobonaro), the Festival brought together some 300 participants-youth groups, artists, academics and local officials-for historical-site visits, seminars and artistic and sports presentations that encouraged reflection on past conflicts and the importance of cross-border fraternity.

Building on this foundation, the 2024 Festival (14–18 October, Oecusse) expanded its programme to include art-for-peace workshops, traditional dance performances, local-product fairs and book launches. By highlighting cultural heritage's role in uniting communities on both sides of the border, the event underscored the power of shared traditions to strengthen understanding and solidarity across nations.

Key stakeholders span government ministries, municipal authorities and community leaders overseeing sacred-house and agricultural celebrations, as well as international partners who fund and deliver urban events. These include Fundação Oriente (Portugal), the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, the French Institute (via the Fête de la Musique partnership), the Asia Foundation, UNDP's PROCULTURA programme and embassies from Australia, the USA and Indonesia. NGOs such as the Alola Foundation and Empreza Di'ak foster women's artisan cooperatives and youth-led arts projects, while academic institutions like the National University of Timor Lorosa'e collaborate with DIFF and Hasoru Malu to offer peer-learning and technical workshops.

This network of public, private and diplomatic actors underpins a festival ecosystem poised for strategic investment, policy refinement and deeper international engagement.

Funding dynamics

Sustainability is, for most festivals, the main challenge in Timor-Leste. The absence of dedicated public policies and regular support programmes associated with limited capacities from the cultural and creative sector prevents long-term planning and vision within the festival ecosystem. Nevertheless, a promising set of festival initiatives is being developed with good potential to grow and connect regionally and internationally.

Community and local-business contributions sustain rural and sacred-house ceremonies, while urban events in Dili rely on:

- Project grants from international donors (EU PROCULTURA, UNDP) and embassies (Australia, USA, Indonesia)
- Foundations such as Fundação Oriente, Calouste Gulbenkian and the French Institute
- NGO partnerships (Alola Foundation, Empreza Di'ak) and corporate sponsorships for targeted festivals

This patchwork model enables event diversity but impedes long-term planning and scale. Establishing multi-year funding schemes-blending government allocations, private sponsorship and donor commitments-would provide the stability needed to deepen impact and foster sustainable growth across the country's festival ecosystem.

Skills development initiatives

Timor-Leste's formal training in festival management is nascent but growing. Under the EU-funded PROCULTURA programme, the National University of Timor Lorosa'e now offers a Cultural Management bachelor's degree, and the Tibar Vocational Centre runs a Cultural Tourism Technician course. The Dili International Film Festival (DIFF) and Oriente Foundation's Hasoru Malu Festival provide year-round masterclasses, peer-learning labs and technical workshops in programming, curation, production and community outreach. Informal on-the-job learning through internships and volunteer roles at key events further reinforces practical skills.

Box: Harani – Celebrating Linguistic Diversity through Theatre

Held in April 2025 at the Lospalos Art and Culture Centre, Harani foregrounded Timor-Leste's linguistic richness with community-led plays in Fatuluku and 31 additional local and national languages. Backed by the DIVERSIDADE fund and organised by Arts and Culture Timor Furak, the festival blended research into traditional tais weaving with workshops in cultural-management and performance. Harani empowered local artists, deepened intercultural dialogue and established a replicable model for future multilingual theatre programming.

Local skills needs and impact

Festival organisers consistently cite gaps in strategic planning, grant writing and funds mobilisation, alongside digital marketing, English proficiency and monitoring & evaluation. Technical production-sound, lighting and venue management-remains under-resourced, especially outside Dili. Addressing these needs will enhance event quality, youth employment and wider community participation, ensuring festivals deliver sustained social and economic benefits across the country.

International collaboration potential

Timor-Leste's festivals already tap bilateral and multilateral partnerships-PROCULTURA, Fundação Oriente and the French Institute's Fête de la Musique-while DIFF and Fronteira Festival host regional artists from Indonesia and beyond. Emerging opportunities include Comunidade dos Países de Língua Portuguesa (CPLP), cultural exchanges, artist residencies via Gulbenkian and Oriente, and co-commissions through BienalSur (2025). Strengthening these ties with UK institutions-through co-curated showcases, training exchanges and digital collaborations-can accelerate skills transfer, diversify funding streams and embed best practices in sustainability and inclusion.

Timor-Leste's festivals stand at the threshold of broader national impact. Ongoing growth depends on:

- Invest in legal frameworks (copyright, artist status) and multi-year funding.
- Enhance venues, technical infrastructure and transport links nationwide Provide targeted
- Training in event management, sustainability and digital engagement Forge public-private and international partnerships to support co-productions, knowledge exchange and decentralised delivery.

Survey Headlines



A core of annual festivals drives the calendar, supplemented by targeted biennial and ad-hoc events.



Key skills need include leadership effectiveness, business planning, and human-resources.



Strategic priorities include gaining international exposure, learning innovative operational models, and deepening networking and partnership-building capabilities.



A deliberate funding blend of private, donor and public sources mitigates state financing volatility.

Festivals to Watch

A number of relatively new and emergent festivals are contributing to the development of Timor-Leste's creative sector. Some of the key festivals are outlined below. However, this is by no means exhaustive and does not capture the full breadth of Timor-Leste's cultural calendar and festival landscape.

Blues & Jazz Festivals

Occasionally held in Dili with support from the U.S. Embassy and the National University of Timor-Leste. These festivals bring international artists into dialogue with local music traditions.

DIFF – Dili International Film Festival

Now entering its 7th edition, DIFF provides a platform for young Timorese filmmakers and connects local audiences with international cinema. Organised by a local NGO, the festival contributes to creative storytelling and intercultural dialogue.

Hasoru Malu

Led by the Oriente Foundation, this multidisciplinary initiative combines performances with residencies, mentoring, and year-round capacity-building for emerging artists. It is recognised for its ecosystem-building role in the cultural sector.

Festa Muzika

A newly launched event inspired by the global Fête de la Musique model, bringing free international and local music performances to public spaces in Dili. It is organised by the Oriente Foundation with the support of the French Institute.

Festival Fronteira

A cultural initiative promoting reconciliation and exchange between Timor-Leste and Indonesia, through artistic programming and public events held in border regions such as Bobonaro and Oecusse. It is coordinated by the National Centre Chega.

Festival Kultura Rezistência Popular

This festival celebrates the role of the arts in Timor-Leste's resistance movement through music, poetry, and visual arts. It is organised in collaboration with cultural producers and public institutions in Dili.

Lantava Festival

A community-driven initiative established in Lautem, led by Timorese diaspora and youth. It combines music, poetry, dance, and entrepreneurship workshops, with strong local engagement and support from various national and international partners.

Rabilau Festival

Launched October 2024 on Mount Rabilau (Ainaro), this event revives the 2010 Ramelau Cultural Festival in a sacred natural setting. Its four pillars-arts & culture, science & technology, sports and literature & cinema-promote peace, eco-tourism and national pride, while integrating contemporary performances, craft markets and local produce.

Tais Festival

Held in 2022 to mark the inscription of tais weaving on the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage list. Highlights traditional textiles and their contemporary relevance.

TasiFest

A commercial music and cultural festival launched in 2024 in Tasitolu. It features Timorese and international artists, alongside workshops on sustainability and the blue economy. It is organised by a private event company with support from UNDP, BNU, and other institutional partners, it has quickly gained national attention.



Case study

Video Mapping Installation during Hasoru Malu.

Photo courtesy of Fundação Oriente.

Hasoru Malu

Facebook: facebook.com/hasorumalu/

Instagram: [@hasorumalu](https://instagram.com/hasorumalu)

- ✓ Example of a festival that transforms heritage sites and public spaces into an interdisciplinary creative incubator.
- ✓ Skills & training hub – integrates seminars, film screenings and workshops close critical gaps. Inclusive access model – free admission, youth education and Fatin-Fatin activations democratise contemporary art.

Hasoru Malu-“to meet and interlace” in Tetun-has emerged as Timor-Leste’s flagship contemporary arts festival, transforming Dili into a two-month laboratory of creative exchange each September and October. Launched by the Oriente Foundation, the festival responds to the country’s acute lack of formal art schools, limited training infrastructure and scarce funding by knitting together visual art, music and performance across heritage venues and public spaces. Its biannual format was inaugurated in 2022 with the Collective Exhibition Timor 20+, which marked the 20th anniversary of independence by presenting more than 50 works from 15 leading Timorese artists. This landmark event drew 3,000 visitors and has since doubled in scale, cementing Hasoru Malu’s role as a catalyst for professional growth and public engagement in the arts.

“This exhibition amplified artists’ voices and provided a tangible platform for growth and advancement within the arts and cultural sectors”

— Joana Saraiva, Director, Oriente Foundation

Under the leadership of Joana Saraiva, the Oriente Foundation has steered Hasoru Malu into an evolving interdisciplinary programme held from May to July. The heart of the festival remains its collective exhibition-curated by Maria Madeira, Bernardino Soares, Inu Bere, Tony Amaral and Simão Pereira-which combines open-call finalists for the Visual Arts Award with invited masters. Surrounding this centrepiece are eight “Hasoru Malu Music” concerts, co-directed by Etson Caminha and Dedyto Kayaka with visual integration by Izu Pereira, as well as an itinerant “Fatin-Fatin” programme of pop-up murals, workshops and micro-performances in Dili’s neighbourhoods. A newly launched Art Club will offer seminars, film screenings and masterclasses-both in person at the Oriente Foundation’s restored Portuguese heritage building and online-to deepen critical skills in contemporary art theory and practice.

Hasoru Malu's distinctive strengths lie in its scale, inclusivity and connectivity. By spanning two months and weaving together exhibitions, performances, residencies and public activations, the festival creates sustained momentum and diverse entry points for audiences. Free admission, youth-focused education programmes and community-based Fatin-Fatin activations ensure that even those unfamiliar with contemporary art can participate. The festival's Global Visual Arts Prize and Cité Internationale des Arts residencies link Timorese creators to international networks, while workshops, mentorships and the Art Club address critical training gaps in curation, production and language skills.

Nonetheless, Hasoru Malu faces significant hurdles. National government funding remains under 20 percent of its budget, making long-term planning precarious. Logistical constraints—from venue infrastructure to travel costs—strain resources, and there is a shortage of staff with large-scale festival management expertise. Environmental sustainability and formal accessibility measures are still nascent, and the festival must balance ambitious growth with operational resilience.

Looking ahead, Hasoru Malu can solidify its impact by forging multi-year funding consortia that combine government, embassies, NGOs and private-sector support. Expanding the Art Club into an accredited incubator with modules in digital arts, curation and English language training would professionalise the creative workforce. Nationwide roll-outs of the Fatin-Fatin model could democratise access to contemporary art beyond Dili, while piloting zero-waste events and accessible design would position the festival as an early adopter of green and inclusive practices in the country. Deepening exchange residencies—both at Cité des Arts and with ASEAN cultural centres—would further weave Timorese artists into global creative circuits.

By interlacing local heritage with international best practices, Hasoru Malu is more than a festival: it is Timor-Leste's creative engine, empowering artists, uniting communities and broadcasting a vibrant cultural voice to the world.

“Hasoru Malu provided an opportunity for creative individuals to exhibit their art and for us, as an audience, to appreciate it. I hope the project can continue and that the Government will pay more attention to culture. It would be wonderful if there were a permanent space for local artists to present their work.”

— Natércia Tilman, Student,
Universidade Nacional
Timor Lorosa'e (UNTL)

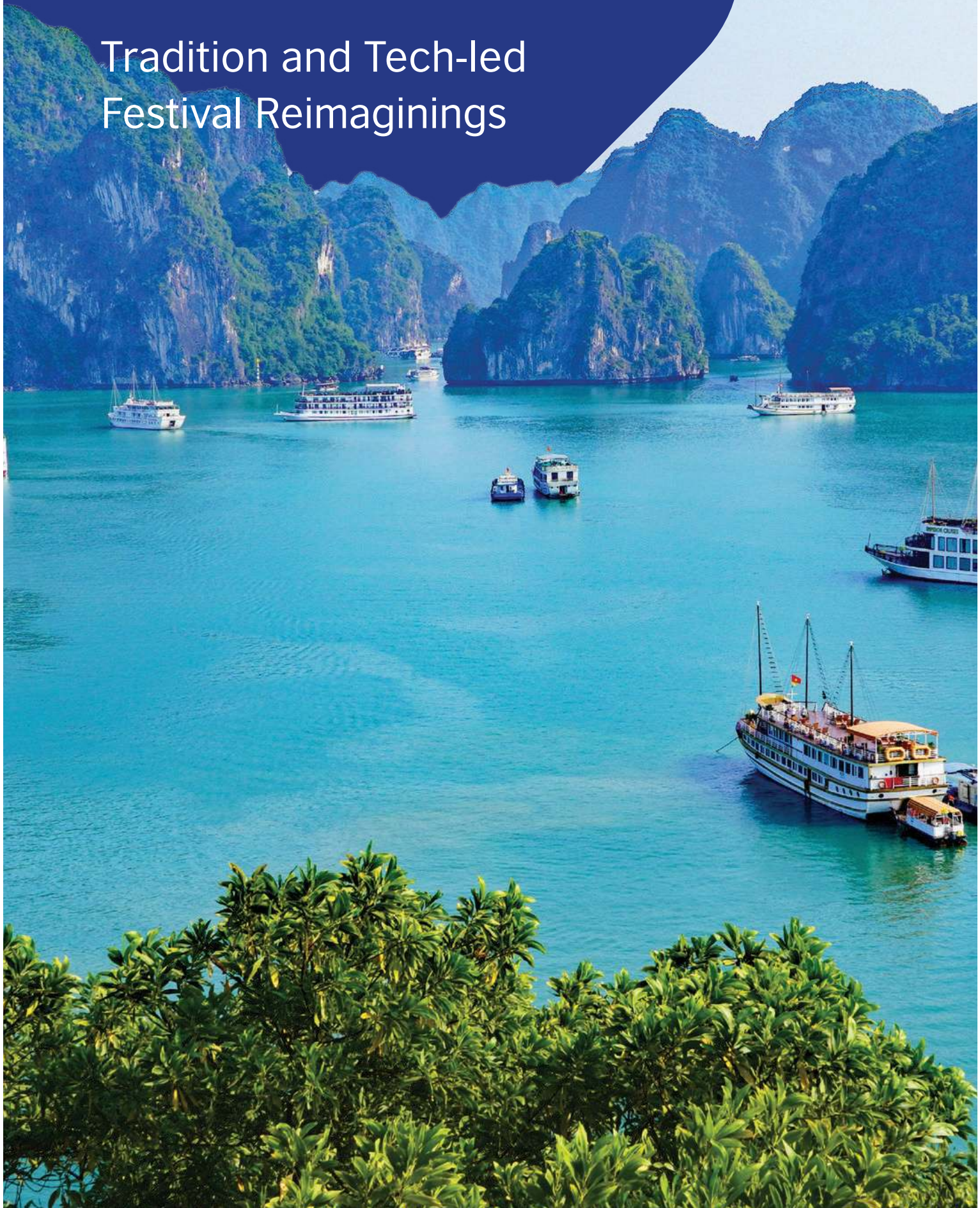


Gallery View during Hasoru Malu.
Photo courtesy of Fundação Oriente.

- ✓ Robust multi-stakeholder partnerships underpin festival resilience.
- ✓ Extended two-month runway – encouraging repeat attendance and deepens cultural engagement.
- ✓ Interdisciplinary incubator format - accelerating creative-industry capacity.

Viet Nam

Tradition and Tech-led Festival Reimaginings



Overview

Viet Nam is a coastal, river-fed nation of just over 100 million people, stretching from the Red River Delta in the north to the Mekong Delta in the south. Its four cultural anchors- Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, Da Nang, and Hue- reflect layers of history, from imperial courts and colonial legacies to contemporary creative hubs. Fifty-four ethnic groups contribute to a rich tapestry of languages, costumes, and customs, while state-sponsored festivals-rooted in rice cultivation, religious rituals, and local lore- bring villages and cities to life throughout the year.

Cultural context

The Vietnamese Government views culture as essential to nation-building and central to economic and political stability. In 2016, it launched Viet Nam's first National Strategy for the Cultural Industries, with a refreshed version underway in 2025. This has led to a process of modernisation in cultural development, including a focus on creative hubs, capacity-building for cultural workers, and innovation across the sector. UNESCO designations for Hanoi (Design), Hoi An (Crafts & Folk Arts) and Hue (Music) underline efforts to harness cultural heritage for urban renewal and innovation. National policies support public-private collaboration, heritage digitisation and greener event practices, aiming to position culture as both an economic asset and a driver of social cohesion and renewal. The country's youthful, highly tech-savvy population—together with a rapidly growing middle class and rising purchasing power—further fuel demand for novel cultural experiences and helps to drive innovation across its festival landscape.

Festival landscape

Viet Nam's festival scene spans centuries-old village rites to contemporary arts gatherings. Traditional cultural festivals-harvest ceremonies,

temple fairs, craft-village anniversaries-sustain local identity, whether in water-puppet shows on the Red River or whale-worship rituals along the central coast. Since the 2010s, city-led events have multiplied: creative design festivals in Hanoi, international film showcases in Ho Chi Minh City, and cultural tourism fairs in Da Nang. **Key trends include:**

- **Rise of New, Brand-Building Festivals:** Provinces and cities with established cultural-tourism profiles-Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, Hue, Da Nang, Hoi An and Da Lat-are supplementing age-old rituals with contemporary, brand-focused events which seek to boost brand awareness in the burgeoning Vietnamese market. These new festivals highlight dynamic art forms (e.g. design, fashion, music, film and gaming), positioning each locality as a destination for fresh cultural experiences.
- **Multi-stakeholder collaboration:** While local authorities are often the host and key sponsor of festivals and events, their content, activities, and operational resources frequently originate from civil society, including businesses, creative producers, individual artists, and international organisations

These festivals are being developed to align with the cultural characteristics and development visions of each locality, with encouragement to integrate elements of traditional cultures into contemporary formats.

As yet, sustainable development factors, such as green initiatives, environmental protection, and inclusiveness, have not yet received substantial and consistent attention in Vietnamese festivals.

Funding dynamics

Festival financing combines municipal sources - such as tourism levies and corporate sponsorship - with ticket sales and donor grants. National cultural funds often back major city festivals, while independent and rural events depend heavily on local authority funding, philanthropy and volunteer support. Persistent challenges include uneven funding outside major cities, short planning timelines and limited fundraising expertise. Transitioning to multi-year funding models and more attractive sponsorship incentives will be key to sustaining grassroots creativity across Viet Nam's regions.

Skills development initiatives

"The 2024 Viet Nam Classical Music Festival revitalised Da Lat's artistic life, attracted nationwide and international visitors, and helped define the city as a hub for art and music, beyond tourism."

— Hien Nguyen, Founder of Pho Ben Doi Creative Studio, Co-organisers of Viet Nam Classical Music Festival 2024

Structured training in festival management now spans Viet Nam's higher-education and non-formal sectors. Hanoi University of Theatre and Cinema offer Events & Festival Directing courses; Viet Nam National University's School of Interdisciplinary Science and Arts integrates cultural-project management into its arts curriculum; and private institutions. Hoa Sen University, Van Lang University-run short-course modules in event logistics, creative marketing and digital storytelling.

Complementing academia, Government Decree 110/2018/ND-CP mandates the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism to deliver annual workshops for provincial cultural managers. Additionally, creative hubs such as Toong and the British Council's training programmes convene workshops on fundraising, audience development, and inclusive programming.

"Now in its fourth edition, Viet Nam Design Week has become a vital platform linking contemporary designers with traditional craft communities nationwide."

— Mr. Le Viet Ha - Chairman of Viet Nam Design Group, Co-Chairman of the Organising Committee

Private-sector and community-based initiatives further broaden access to skills development. Enterprises frequently run in-house training in sponsorship, fundraising, and digital production, while creative hubs and online platforms host low-cost or free clinics on project management, audience engagement, and monitoring, evaluation & learning (MEL). At the same time, both traditional village festivals and contemporary city events serve as living laboratories: through internships, volunteer roles, and entry-level jobs, emerging practitioners gain hands-on experience in arts communication, proposal writing, crisis management, and data archiving.

Festivals as Living Learning Labs

Viet Nam's major events double as practical training grounds for the next generation of cultural professionals.

The Ho Chi Minh City International Film Festival hosts mentorship labs where emerging programmers work alongside festival directors to curate screenings and panel discussions.

Similarly, Da Lat Flower Festival offers digital-marketing internships and behind-the-scenes workshops in event logistics, giving young practitioners hands-on experience in campaign planning and site management.

Local skills needs and impact

While Viet Nam's cultural and artistic festivals benefit from creative thinking, digital innovation,

cultural awareness, and the ability to adapt local heritage for diverse audiences, they would be further strengthened by targeted capacity-building to enhance organisational and management skills. Key areas for development include:

- Cultural and artistic criticism
- Intellectual property management (IP)
- Crisis management
- Monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL)
- Audience development.

International collaboration potential

Between 2020 and 2023, Viet Nam concluded 18 government-level cultural cooperation agreements with partners across Asia, Europe, the Middle East and the Americas, enabling Vietnamese Cultural Weeks, film expos and performing-arts showcases both at home and abroad. A landmark MoU with the British Council in June 2023 launched the UK/Viet Nam Season 2023, a six-month programme of co-produced events spanning theatre, film, visual and performing arts, design, music, literature and research, which forged new networks among artists, organisations and audiences in both countries.

In 2023, the establishment of a dedicated Cinema Support Fund further empowered Vietnamese filmmakers to participate in international festivals, markets and awards, boosting the global profile of Viet Nam's screen industries. National policy under the External Cultural Relations Strategy encourages the import of global best practice alongside the development of home-grown 'festival brands'. That same year, Da Lat (Music) and Hoi An (Crafts & Folk Arts) joined UNESCO's Creative Cities Network, opening pathways for city-to-city exchanges and joint programming. Together, these strategic initiatives have strengthened institutional capacity, broadened audience engagement and laid the groundwork for future co-commissions, artist residencies, and

digital collaborations that deepen Viet Nam's international cultural ties.

The growing diversity of cultural and artistic festivals in Viet Nam reflects the broader development of the country's cultural and creative industries. Festivals serve as platforms to showcase the creative capacity of growing human resources and cultural enterprises in Viet Nam. Looking ahead, sustained growth will depend on securing multi-year funding partnerships, simplifying regulatory processes, and investing in accessible infrastructure and technical capacity. Equally vital are targeted skills development in green-event management, digital engagement and data-driven evaluation, alongside clear sustainability and inclusion standards. By reinforcing these priorities through policy and international collaboration, Viet Nam's festivals can mature into enduring engines of cultural innovation and local development.

"To sustain and grow future festivals, we need funding from Asian and UK partners, stronger local support for policy and promotion, improved infrastructure, and opportunities for learning and exchange."

— Hien Nguyen, Founder of Pho Ben Doi Creative Studio, Co-organisers of Viet Nam Classical Music Festival 2024

Survey Headlines



Festivals span art, film, and music, blending traditional and contemporary forms with strong social and civic missions.



Key skills needs include event management, strategic planning and leadership.



Strategic priorities include building international networks, adopting new artistic/operational models, and securing overseas funding know-how.



Funding is fragmented; most festivals hunt for guidance on international sponsorship routes.

Festivals to Watch

Since 2010, coinciding with the growth and diversification of the cultural and creative industries in larger cities such as Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, Da Nang, Hue, etc., new cultural and arts festivals have grown in terms of their quantity, scale and geographic distribution. Prominent new festivals are listed below. While this list showcases selected examples, it is by no means exhaustive and does not capture the full breadth of Viet Nam's cultural calendar and festival landscape.

Hanoi International Film Festival

Launched in 2010, Hanoi's flagship cinema festival showcases global features and shorts alongside talent labs that nurture emerging Vietnamese filmmakers.

Autumn Meeting

An annual November gathering in Ho Chi Minh City where directors, actors, and producers join intensive workshops and a pitching market to incubate new Southeast-Asian film projects.

Ho Chi Minh City International Film Festival (HIFF)

A newcomer founded in 2024, centring on cutting-edge storytelling, VR, and Asian voices while turning the city's creative hubs into open screening rooms.

Da Nang Asian Film Festival

Held every July on Viet Nam's central coast, the event champions ASEAN and wider Asian cinema, pairing public screenings with craft masterclasses.

Viet Nam Film Festival

The country's biennial national awards (since 1970) that rotate host cities and culminate in the prestigious Golden Lotus prize.

Viet Nam Festival of Creativity & Design (VFCD)

A nationwide November programme celebrating cross-disciplinary design, heritage, and tech innovation through exhibitions, talks, and city take-overs.

Viet Nam Design Week

An October week in Ho Chi Minh City combining showcases, awards, and networking to spotlight interior, product, and brand-design excellence.

Hanoi Festival of Creative Design (HFCD)

A nine-day November series using historic sites as stages for installations, workshops, and hackathons aligned with UNESCO Creative City goals.

Viet Nam GameVerse

The country's largest gaming ecosystem event (Feb–May), drawing studios, esports finals, and policy forums under one roof in Ho Chi Minh City.

Monsoon Music Festival

An open-air autumn festival inside Hanoi's Imperial Citadel, mixing regional headliners with emerging acts for crowds of 25 000+.

Viet Nam Music Week

A December industry summit and showcase in Ho Chi Minh City that upskills music-business professionals and spotlights new Vietnamese talent.

HOZO International Music Festival

A free December street festival on Nguyen Hue Boulevard, presenting global and local artists with a strong sustainability message.

Viet Nam Classical Music Festival

A March celebration in Da Lat making orchestral and chamber repertoire accessible through concerts, exhibitions, and youth workshops.

No Cai Bum

A roving contemporary-art week (next edition in August) that takes over unconventional venues with exhibitions, performances, and community projects.

O Ạt Oh Art

A Saigon pop-up festival (July 2025) featuring exhibitions, concerts, and film screenings that spotlight experimental Vietnamese creatives.

Hanoi Art Connecting

A September workshop-plus-exhibition platform linking young Vietnamese artists with international peers for residencies and public shows.

Hanoi Open Theatre Festival

A biennial November event where eleven curated plays are staged free across city theatres to broaden civic engagement with the performing arts.

Krossing Over Arts Festival

A dance-led, interdisciplinary festival in Ho Chi Minh City (April, biennial) that activates unconventional spaces with site-specific performances.

Hue Festival

A flagship biennial celebration of Vietnamese heritage (June 2025) that animates Hue with traditional and contemporary music, theatre, and street parades from across the country and the world.

International Dance Festival (Hue)

A week-long August gathering drawing international troupes to Thua Thien-Hue under the banner “Convergence, Creativity – Shine Together.”

Viet Nam Manga Festival

An August competition-and-fan gathering alternating between Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City that nurtures the country’s graphic-story scene.

Hanoi Book Festival

A late-September outdoor fair along the Old Quarter’s walking streets, themed “Capital of Culture” and rich in heritage book launches.

Manga Comic Con Viet Nam

A July expo at Sky Expo Centre in Ho Chi Minh City blending anime, cosplay, comics, and gaming for a 60 000-strong fandom.

Da Nang International Fireworks Festival

An annual summer event (May–July 2025) in Da Nang that brings together international and Vietnamese teams for a series of fireworks displays along the Han River, accompanied by live performances and cultural programming.



Case study

Viet Nam Music Week

Photo Credit: Nguyen Ha

Viet Nam Music Week

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- ✓ Example of a hybrid festival-conference model with a strong comprehensive capacity-building component.
- ✓ Strategic city-branding impact – clustering events in landmark venues to drive tourism, hospitality spend and HCMC's creative reputation.
- ✓ Diverse, high-quality programming – from copyright law briefings to traditional-instrument showcases and open-mic jam sessions.

Viet Nam Music Week (VMW) is a fast-growing, ambitious music-industry festival based in Ho Chi Minh City-Viet Nam's commercial and creative hub. Launched in 2021, this week-long programme positions itself as a strategic catalyst for professionalising the Vietnamese music sector, fostering cultural exchange, and enhancing city branding. It is delivered through a public-private partnership led by the Viet Nam Music Industry Network (VMIN), with support from municipal cultural authorities and a portfolio of international and domestic sponsors-including the British Council, Believe, TuneCore, and Universal Music Viet Nam.

Despite strong creative energy, Ho Chi Minh City's music ecosystem still faces challenges: fragmented infrastructure, limited specialist training, and modest international visibility. VMW addresses these gaps by combining business insight with a celebration of contemporary Vietnamese creativity and cultural heritage. As Thao Nghiem, VMIN co-founder, explains:

“VMW offers young Vietnamese artists a rare chance to showcase their talent, connect with professionals, and explore their role in the wider music ecosystem.”

— Thao Nghiem, Co-founder, Vietnam Music Industry Network

Born from the need to connect a rapidly expanding pool of artists, entrepreneurs, and policy makers, VMW began with online panels and modest live showcases during the pandemic recovery year of 2021. Four editions later it has matured into an interdisciplinary platform that combines conferences, workshops, incubators, networking mixers and night-time performances across landmark downtown venues such as the Ho Chi Minh City Arts Centre.

In 2024, VMW joined forces with HOZO – Ho Chi Minh International Music Festival – to form the city’s first integrated “music week,” signalling Viet Nam’s intent to compete with regional creative capitals.

VMW’s curatorial approach mirrors Viet Nam’s own blend of youthful energy and deep tradition. Daytime conferences explore topics ranging from copyright law to AI-driven marketing, while evening showcases pair emerging indie acts with reinterpretations of traditional instruments. Interactive elements-QR-coded resources, live polls, open-mic jam sessions-invite audiences to move seamlessly between learning and listening.

Over four seasons, the programme has delivered:

17 seminar days featuring **130+ speakers**
from **50+ companies**

110 emerging artists introduced on-stage
or online

1,450+ on-site check-ins with a **93 %**
return-interest rate

VMW also functions as a talent incubator. Artists receive one-to-one mentorship from the festival’s music director, while young producers and marketers gain paid short-term roles that often lead to careers. Partnerships with universities and cultural institutes support research on music tech, audience data, and accessibility-areas organisers identify as critical skill gaps.

By clustering seminars, performances, and brand activations in the city centre, VMW stimulates visitor spending on hotels, transport, food, and retail-generating revenue for local SMEs and service providers. Its expanding list of international speakers positions Ho Chi Minh City as a rising destination in Southeast Asia’s music-tourism circuit.

Challenges remain: licensing bureaucracy, venue accessibility issues, and a shortage of mid-to-senior professionals in festival management. Yet VMW’s hybrid festival–business conference model presents a replicable blueprint for equitable, sustainable sector growth. Organisers aim to expand international residencies, secure multi-year private sponsorships, and embed robust data systems for evaluation. There is a clear ambition to champion inclusive design and position VMW as a regional benchmark for music- industry development in emerging markets. By fusing capacity-building with cultural celebration, Viet Nam Music Week is carving out a distinctive role-nurturing the next generation of music professionals while broadcasting Viet Nam’s evolving soundscape to the world.

“Sustainable funding remains a key challenge for VMW. Despite strong creative interest, support for music-focused events is limited, requiring resourcefulness and collaboration to deliver impact.”

— Thao Nghiem, Co-founder,
Vietnam Music Industry Network

- ✓ Opportunity to strengthen regional and international partnerships - artist residencies and co-productions.
- ✓ Data-driven capacity-building - scale workshops, incubators and mentorships.
- ✓ Ambition to embed inclusive design and elevate the festival as the regional benchmark for music-industry development in emerging markets.





3. ASEAN Festivals: forging a creative future

This Report shines a light on the role and impact of festivals across the ASEAN creative economy. It describes the huge variety of festivals and identifies the ways festivals are contributing to the dynamism and distinctiveness of local and regional cultural activities. Festivals are a vector for sustainable development, catalyst for the creative economy and platform for collaboration and exchange. Increasingly they are playing a direct role in supporting diverse creative talent to flourish and providing pathways for innovation and growth across the CCIs and other parallel sectors such as tourism. They are also leading on the response to global challenges, working to build commitment to tackling climate crisis and inequality. Festivals drive positive impact across ASEAN.

This positive impact is based on the commitment and creativity of festival managers, producers, volunteers, artists, creative entrepreneurs and multiple types of partners. It is also forged through collaboration, with flows of exchange connecting festivals across cities, nations and increasingly at an ASEAN level and beyond. A key finding of this research is the appetite for more collaboration, toward establishing an ASEAN-wide festival exchange and professional development model

which facilitates coordinated approaches to skills and capacity-building, programming, audience development and innovation. Festivals across ASEAN often struggle in terms of establishing sustainable and resilient business models. Festival managers work tirelessly to balance their creative ambitions with the funding reality. By working together, with dedicated development activities for ASEAN festivals, the festival sector can have a much more sustainable and impactful future.

Based on the survey and interviews with both festival managers and partners in government and civil society across the ASEAN region, this report has identified 5 key focus areas which can serve as terms of reference for festival development and guide ASEAN's cooperative efforts with partners such as the UK:

1. Establish a festival managers and producer network to operate as a knowledge exchange and capacity-building platform.

This can include modules on festival management good practice, information on funding models and sources, and calls for collaboration and mobility which can foster stronger connections across ASEAN.

2. Connect this network to a collaboration and capacity-building programme for UK/ASEAN festivals.

This will build on the current capacity-building programme to include a wider programme of knowledge exchange mentoring and festival innovation workshops.

3. To advance the implementation of the ASEAN Creative Economy Framework, develop a festival accelerator to boost the growth and development of festival clusters in key hubs across the region.

This can draw from the Jogja Festivals model: to establish place-based clusters of festival development which drive growth and innovation across the creative economy. This can include one cluster per nation, together forming a network of centres of excellence for festival development.

4. Support festival development strategies as part of a cultural policy innovation programme for ASEAN.

This should focus on festivals as vectors for sustainable development, investing in festivals to operate as impact hubs for topics such as climate action and gender inclusion.

5. Support R&D in digital technologies to future-proof festivals.

This includes models which leverage AI to enhance audience development and ticketing, approaches to immersive technologies to deepen festival experience (for in-person and online audiences), and models to monetise different aspects of the festival experience. This aligns with parallel strategic activities at an ASEAN and UK/ASEAN level.

Festivals are the beating heart of the ASEAN Creative Economy. With dedicated support and a new era of collaboration and exchange, the festival sector is poised to drive growth and catalyse innovation for generations to come.





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Festivals in ASEAN Foundations of the Creative Economy

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