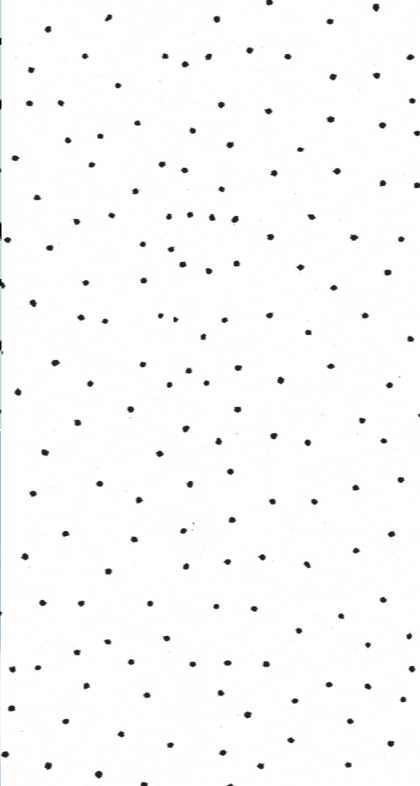


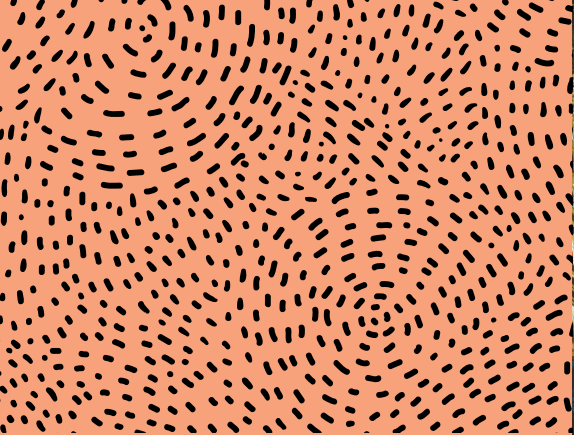


starry



skies





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How did Starry Skies begin—what ignited the initial idea? Co-founder and director Sid is the creative mind behind our big sister event Shambala and was the catalyst behind Starry Skies. The concept came from the idea of needing another holiday to recover after going on a holiday with the kids, for party people who've turned into party parents!

Where do you look for inspiration when planning the event? We spend a lot of time reminiscing about what we got up to as kids, and we think about how we can bring the best bits of our own childhoods to the fields of today. We also make a real point of talking to the kids and grown-ups in our community and listening to what they want to see happen. Shambala is also a great source of inspiration, and there is a crossover with some of the amazing people involved in that festival, so that helps.

What has your experience with festivals been like before? I've worked at them and played at them and they're always good fun, but these days I definitely prefer the smaller, gentler events! It's turning out great for me because my friends are all having families now, so they want to come along.

Have you experienced any other kid-focused festivals? I grew up going to Sidmouth Folk Festival, which I have very fond memories of. In more recent years it's been all about Shambala—although, I am a bit biased! Shambala successfully walks that line between a mega party and a family-friendly event, which is tricky to do.

Where does Starry Skies take place? How did you find the location? For the past five years we were based on a beautiful farm in Herefordshire. Now we've moved about thirty miles away to another stunning family farm in the Welsh village of Usk, Monmouthshire, with rolling hills, fabulous forests and an ancient iron fort. We were seriously lucky to stumble across it through a friend of a friend, and we're really excited to have a new site that we can't wait for our campers to put their stamp on.

How long has the festival been going for, and when does it take place? Starry Skies is currently in its sixth year. Usually, it takes place either in the last week of July or on the first weekend of August. This year, though, it's the second weekend of August. Naturally, as a families-only event, it's important that we pick a time that falls comfortably within the school holidays.



What is the set-up like, and what areas do you have? The site is small, but perfectly formed. We have a few different areas, from the Centre Camp barns that house the bar, stage and food market to the fun field, full of big and little tops ready for workshops and shows. Our woodland fort area will be filled with outdoor activities and lit up at night with amazing colours, to really accentuate the ancient trees and allow the magic and history of the site to be explored.

What is the daily rhythm of the festival, and how has it been planned? It's a flurry of organised chaos with the relaxed vibe of a long summer's day. Families are up with the birdsong, and we have to make sure there's a chance to get some good breakfast and a strong coffee from about 6.30am. Activities and workshops start from around 8am and carry on throughout the day, until the evening entertainment kicks off in Centre Camp. Music starts around 7pm and keeps people dancing until around 11. Then it's fingers crossed for some sleep before it all starts again!

How many people go? We are big believers that the best family events are intimate—we want parents to be able to relax, knowing that even though their kids are running wild, they're never that far away. We also really want to maintain a family-camping-holiday feel—large festivals can be quite intimidating for both children and their parents, and you lose that sense of campfire community. With that in mind, Starry Skies is capped at 250 families.

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What is the objective of the festival? It's about making sure that families have everything they need to have a great holiday experience while getting the chance to truly reconnect with nature and with each other. This is very much a get-your-hands-dirty holiday. It can seem that there is far less opportunity these days for our kids to climb trees, scrape knees, build treehouses, make dens and generally go a bit feral—we want to remedy that!

Who are the artists, and what do you look for in an artist? We're not about big-name acts—we look for bands and DJs that will get everybody dancing, whether you're a toddler or a grandparent. That could be in the form of a ceilidh band, gypsy swing or stomping folk sing-alongs. Every year, we also have a family rave, which is a massive hit among the parents. We even invite people to bring along their own vinyl, which our DJs will spin for them. Saying that, we're pretty chuffed to have Mad Dog Mcree playing for us on Saturday this year—an awesome throw-your-shoes-off kind of gig that we've been trying to bag for ages.

How do kids react when they arrive? Last year, a boy hurtled into the information tent on the first day and screamed, "THIS IS BETTER THAN MAJORCA!" at the top of his lungs. A pretty stellar report, we thought! Some families come every year, so their kids know the score, jump straight out of the car and tear off immediately to get stuck in. First-timers can have a wide-eyed, nervous hour, where they

stick close to their parents while they get the lay of the land, but before you know it, they've fashioned a bow and arrow and are halfway up a tree.

How do the parents react? Our small size, and the fact that everyone is there with their families, means a real sense of community is fostered very quickly—whether you're a Starry veteran or new to the game. Once tents are up and everyone gets settled, there's a communal exhale and people can get into the swing of their holiday.

Why do you think a festival like this is needed? It seems that there's a generation of parents who grew up partying hard at festivals and now have a few kids in tow, and they want some of the festival vibe without the endurance or the worry about their children being exposed to things a little too mature for them. We also think that in a world where iPads and screens are an increasingly unavoidable part of life, it does us all good to reconnect with nature and go fully back to basics. It's good for the soul—and if we want the next generation to protect our remaining wild and natural spaces, we need them to feel connected to it, and part of it.

Can you share some nice moments of kids experiencing the festival—memories that stay with you? The Woodland Tribe blows my mind each year. This large woodland area is equipped with tools, wood, ropes, a flying fox and monkey nets, and it's staffed by awesome adventure-play leaders. The idea is for kids to get stuck in to building their own adventure playground, creating incredible treehouse structures, cooking over open fires and embracing 'risky play'.

Some people do seem a bit taken aback on arrival, watching very small children working away with saws, hammers and nails, but it's incredible how safely and responsibly they use these tools with the right guidance—and at the end of the event, they'll have built their own treetop town. It's like the Swiss Family Robinson meets the Lost Boys.

What is unique about the festival? We've never been quite comfortable with the festival label, in all honesty—we see Starry Skies as a new hybrid between a traditional festival and a family camping holiday. It's about spending time together in the great outdoors, rather than sitting in front of a main stage, watching bands all day and then struggling to sleep to the sound of a thudding bass line. Our programmed activities include things like Forest School, mud kitchens, tree climbing and talent shows, as well as getting to meet giant insects from Bristol Zoo—last year we even had one of the producers of *Planet Earth* teaching our campers how to be wildlife filmmakers.

We're also really proud to be independent, with no sponsorship or brand activations popping up everywhere. It does mean the budget is small, but this helps to keep things simple and authentic, which is how we like it.

What are you most proud of about Starry Skies? It's got to be all the human beings that make it what it is. Our little crew is just incredible; hard-working, dedicated and resourceful to the end. Plus all the practitioners and workshop leaders who come with open arms, ready to inspire and illuminate. Then the parents turn up, having fought their way through preparations, packing, travelling, entertaining and everything else just to get their kids to the event and prepare them for a cracking holiday. Lastly, it's the kids themselves who literally bring the fun. They are just endlessly curious, open-minded and brilliant. It makes everything totally worthwhile.

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