



PARADISE CITY FESTIVAL



Photo by Annika Wallis



CITY, COUNTRY

Steenokkerzeel, Belgium

DAILY CAPACITY

12,000

SITE

Castle Ribaucourt Park near Brussels

CAMPING

Yes

NUMBER OF DAYS

3

ESTABLISHED IN

2015

GENRE

Electronic

CHALLENGE & SOLUTION

Keeping the on-site ponds from being polluted by treating grey and black water

When the visitors of Paradise City set foot on the festival site, they tread where people are normally not allowed to go. The 90-hectare park, filled with meadows, forests and ponds, belongs to the privately owned Castle Ribaucourt. As such, the nature and bird reserve is usually closed to the public. The castle goes all the way back to the 12th century when it was a mere fortified wooden tower. Today, the 200+ room building is considered to be one of the most beautiful castles in the area.

The castle domain is located on the northern border of the larger Brussels region, close to the city's airport. While the festival site is capped at 12,000 visitors, the number of unique visitors of the 3-day festival is closer to 22,000; and Paradise

City keeps growing. In 2022, the campsite capacity increased from 2500 to 3750 people.

A Greener Festival (AGF) – an international NGO focused on event sustainability – has audited Paradise City regarding its environmental efforts for the past few years. The festival has received AGF's four-star rating (their highest possible rating) two years in a row now, making it the most sustainable festival in Belgium and one of the greenest festivals worldwide. "Paradise City have taken huge strides and shown an outstanding drive for a greener festival. The team have shown a clear determination to continue to break ground going forwards, maintaining this in the face of a pandemic," AGF's appraisal read.

CELEBRATING ELECTRONIC MUSIC IN A NATURE RESERVE WITH A MEDIIEVAL CASTLE



THE CHALLENGE



KEEPING THE PONDS CLEAN

According to the survey conducted by the festival each year, sustainability and the location are among the main reasons why visitors choose Paradise City, Sustainability Manager, Esther Koshari, tells us. AGF assesses festivals in 12 categories, and Koshari is happy to announce that Paradise City is active in all of them. “Sustainability is in our DNA, so in every step we take, we will always look for the most sustainable, affordable way to do something,” she says.

Water is one of the assessed categories and an important element of the festival site. The ponds serve as a habitat for the local flora and fauna; some form a moat around the castle, creating a little island called ‘Food Island,’ making them an important structural element as well. This island can be accessed via bridges. According to Koshari, it is the festival’s responsibility to make sure the bodies of water on the site do not get polluted.

“Festivals generate a lot of wastewater from showers and toilets. So, there is a lot of water that needs to be collected and purified,” she adds. However, the local treatment plants cannot handle the sudden influx of wastewater that 22,000 visitors produce in three days, so the festival has to come up with other solutions.

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TREATING GREY WATER ON SITE AND BLACK WATER OFF SITE

A possible solution would be to collect the wastewater in containers and let them sit on the festival site, Koshari says. Every day, a small amount of water would flow into the sewage system and end up at the local treatment plant. The disadvantage of this method is that it takes months, which makes it expensive as well. So, Paradise City came up with a different solution. The festival collects black water (wastewater from toilets), in containers and transports them to a Belgian company called Aquafin, which specialises in treating water for reuse. According to the [company](#), the water doesn't have drinking water quality after the treatment but is clean enough to be released back into nature.

For the less polluted grey water (wastewater from showers), Paradise City partners with [Hello Water](#). The Belgian company offers mobile water treatment plants that clean grey water with the help of plants. The mobile unit is placed at the campsite, filters the water and releases it back into the ponds. Again, the water doesn't have drinking water quality, but is clean enough for the environment.

Another factor polluting bodies of water is trash – cups and other things that visitors throw into the ponds or that end up in them

by accident. This became particularly important when Paradise City started organising events on the water during the pandemic, called Paradise Down by the Lake. “It was like Paradise City but on boats. You could be on a boat with your little bubble of eight people, so it was Covid-proof,” Koshari explains. Since then, the festival has partnered with the international NGO [River Cleanup](#) that helped them free the ponds from trash. During the festivals, visitors can donate the deposit of their reusable cups to the NGO by throwing the cups into big collection boxes on the festival site.

Paradise City used the forced pandemic hiatus of 2020 to invest in preserving the small lake around the castle, Koshari tells us. The shore had slowly been sinking into the pond, making it shallower each year, so they reinstalled and reinforced the pondside and protected it with plants. The mud extracted from the pond has been reused as fertiliser for the ground of the park and in the fields.

In 2021, the festival invested in improvements for their floating bridges. Since then, the bridges don't move the mud on the pond floor as much, resulting in clearer water.

THE SOLUTION



REDUCING WATER USE WITH A SHARED TOILET ZONE

In addition to water treatment, the festival tries to reduce water use. In 2022, there were still a few water toilets in the comfort zone of the camping ground, but all toilets on the actual festival site were vacuum toilets, which only need a fraction of the water for flushing. “We have a lot more vacuum toilets this year because we have a shared toilet zone, which was used by camping but also by the festival. When the festival was open, it closed for the camping, and when the festival was closed, it opened for the camping,” Koshari explains.

Dry toilets would be a natural next step. “They are quite clean and very nice to use,” but they are also still quite rare and expensive in Belgium.

Filtered tap water was offered for free throughout the festival in 2022, making plastic bottles redundant.

Water clocks help the festival team to find out exactly how much water was used during the event. Unfortunately, at the time of writing, the numbers for 2022 were not in yet. “I think it’s super important to measure everything you do. It’s not rocket science, it just takes a lot of time and effort to collect everything. But when you have all the data in one place you can see where you can improve,” Koshari says.



WHAT'S NEXT?

Paradise City will try to introduce dry toilets in the next edition, in a smaller toilet zone with just a handful to test them on the audience. They are also talking to a company that can treat black water from vacuum toilets on site for reuse in toilets, which would further reduce the water use and eliminate the need to transport the collected black water to a treatment company. Ultimately, the festival would like to find ways to treat water so it becomes drinkable again.

Besides water, the festival has set up a green mobility plan that includes night trains to reduce travel emissions. The already meat-free menu will be discussed again to see if fish could be removed or more vegan options introduced.