



Les Méditerranéennes Festival Argelès-sur-Mer

Phil Meadley heads to the south of France to enjoy the music of the Mediterranean

If you are feeling adventurous after dusting off those well-worn WOMAD sandals, then how about a hop across the channel at the end of August to attend one of the most intimate and picturesque festivals in Europe? Les Méditerranéennes Festival is in its eighth year, but has lain almost undiscovered outside of France since its inception. Set in the foothills of the Pyrenees in the grounds of the fairytale Château Valmy just outside the seaside town of Argelès-sur-Mer, this distinctly Catalan-flavoured event offers up the very best Mediterranean artists in an exquisite setting on the southernmost point of France.

The festival is organised by Paris-based Azimuth Productions whose joint directors Geneviève Girard and Bernard Batzen are dedicated to providing the best quality music from across the Mediterranean and North Africa. The festival began in Céret (around

30km from Argelès towards the Pyrenees mountains) in 1996. After five years they moved to Argelès because of its greater accessibility, stunning geographical situation, and support from the local authorities. "We believe that success for a festival is having a strong identity with real links to the local environment," Bernard Batzen explains. "We are in Catalonia near to the Mediterranean sea. This was the birthplace of European civilisation, and we feel we should bring our little contribution to help and bring peace, tolerance and understanding in an area that has seen so many centuries of fighting and war. This spirit of tolerance is also driving us when it comes to choosing the type of music we want to present. We have a very open programme with all kinds of popular music, as long as there is a strong stage performance."

This year the festival has moved from the first weekend in September to August 18-22.

One of the main advantages of the former was that the French summer holidays had finished and the place was relatively peaceful aside from the genial festival celebrations. The drawback was that the region is liable to heavy flooding at that time of year, and in 2002 many of the artists got stranded on the last day. The biggest advantage of moving the festival forward into August is that some of the 200,000 French sun worshippers will be persuaded to attend a top quality festival that has suffered from low attendance in the past.

I'd first heard about the festival through Tunisian singer Amina Annabi, who invited me to come over and see her perform live with her new band. It was a happy twist of fate, and also a case of being in the right place at the right time. Late in the evening the festival hosts a club night in Argelès port where a host of Mediterranean DJs spin their latest tunes. I was invited to DJ between bands on the main stage, but a bomb scare



MAIN: *Main stage in the Parc de Valmy*
 ABOVE: *Ojos de Brujo heat up the festival*
 BELOW: *The Mediterranean backdrop*
 ALL PHOTOS: *Jean Giralt*



blighted my first appearance. There is a certain amount of racial tension in the south of France, and the weighty North African line-up of Amina, Idir, Simon Shaheen, and Khaled, had prompted a bomb threat. This meant the start was delayed for an hour and a half whilst the French police nonchalantly wandered around smoking Gauloise and checking litterbins. As I was on the sound desk surrounded by loads of electronic equipment, the experience was unnerving. Matters didn't improve when an increasingly restless crowd of impassioned Algerians had to wait over an hour for Khaled to appear on stage.

When one is immersed in a music festival, it is sometimes difficult to think of anything else, and although this particular part of the Languedoc-Roussillon region was once an important trade route that crossed the Albères mountain between Spain and France – and Barcelona is only an hour and a half's drive away – the main priority seems to be music, food, and lazing on the beach. However there are museums housing Romanesque art, and military architecture in the old village of Argelès that date back to its origins as a heavily fortified Catalan town. There are also plenty of mountain walks should you feel energetic and inspired. Numerous hotels and campsites are dotted around the town and surrounding countryside, all at very reasonable prices, so you can either rough it or lounge around a pool before the main festivities start at 7.30pm each evening. If you are lucky enough, you may even catch some musicians busking on a street corner as you wind your way to the beach.

One of the beauties, and one of the more challenging aspects of this festival, is that very little English is spoken. I had to rely on the very amiable Azimuth staff to see me through, but it does make one feel part of a very intimate Catalanian crossroads for Spanish and French musicians – especially backstage where everybody lounges round tables drinking wine and discussing future collaborations.

Les Méditerranéennes retains a genteel aspect that many hardened festival goers may find disconcerting at first. There is only one stage, which is set on the lawn to the side of the fairytale château. The open vista of the stage enables you to look out towards the coastline in the valley below, and the effect is one of peaceful serenity. Last year it was only when the kids started arriving on Sunday evening armed with nose piercings, baggy combat trousers and dreadlocks that the place started to take on a more surreal edge. That night Massilia Sound System produced a vibrant blend of Gallic ska-meets-clubbed up Marseilles traditional rhythms, and Ojos de Brujo impressed with their manic flamenco inspired drum'n'bass meets Latin hip-hop rhythms. Paris, Barcelona, Algiers, Santiago de Cuba, and Buenos Aires, were well represented in the first two days by Algerian singer Souad Massi, *fado* singer Katia Guerreiro, Cuba's Raul Paz, and the Gotan Project.

This year sees a fascinating line-up including Bob Marley's old band The Wailers, the Fabulous Trobadors from Toulouse, new Spanish sensations Amparanoia, and Jane Birkin. "This year the first night is rock orientated, the second night is more reggae, and the third is world and *chanson*," Batzen points out. "But I think the highlight will be Jane Birkin singing Serge Gainsbourg songs with oriental arrangements played by Algerian musicians." With a crowd whose capacity is only two or three thousand, this is the perfect place to see great music and lose oneself in the lazy Mediterranean lifestyle.



This year's festival runs from August 18-22. For more information see www.lesmediterraneennes.fr