

The picturesque town of Tulle in southern France plays host to a four-day, accordion fuelled fiesta each September



You may think Tulle is a meshy material beloved of ballroom dancers and ballerinas, and you'd be right. But it's also a town in south-west France where they celebrate the accordion all year round, but especially in mid-September at the Nuits de Nacre (Pearly Nights) festival.

"There's no accident in Tulle hosting an accordion festival," says Laurence Lamy, the festival's long-time director. "This town is the accordion's last bastion in France. Here we have the know-how and the heritage."

In this capital of the very rural Corrèze département, squeezed into a narrow river valley, they both make and conserve accordions, host France's last full-scale manufacturer, Maugein, and two museum collections of accordions (Lamy's main job is boss of the Pôle de l'Accordéon, France's principal accordion archive). To highlight and revel in its rich squeezebox tradition, each year Tulle invites accordionists from around the world to play the four-day festival which fills the town with a unique range of moods – from joyous to melancholic, from yearning to rumbustious – that the accordion can conjure, spreading a good-time small-town feeling of friendship and harmony.

A regular at the Nuits de Nacre is the Manaswing quartet, with feisty Sonia Rekis on accordion, propelling a highly danceable *mélange* of *musette* and Gypsy jazz called *swing manouche*. "This is the most beautiful and biggest accordion festival in France, so I keep coming back," Rekis enthuses, playing in the tree-shaded Place des Frères Maugein which honours the cherished local accordion makers.

An instrument deeply associated with France, but which faded fast in the later decades of the 20th century, the accordion has for some years now been making a

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LES NUITS DE NACRE TULLE, FRANCE

Keith Mundy goes squeezebox crazy in south-west France at the annual accordion festival

PHOTOS KEITH MUNDY

comeback in its natural habitat and across the world. Once the essential accompaniment at village dances and the *bal musette* dancehalls of working-class Paris, and in traditional environments elsewhere like Cajun hoedowns or Colombian fiestas, today the accordion is an ingredient in a wide range of musical genres.

In Tulle at the Nuits de Nacre, the evidence is overwhelming. Named after the traditional mother-of-pearl decoration on accordions – this is an instrument which rivals the electric guitar in fancy shiny coatings – the festival welcomes performers from every musical niche possible, as long as one of the band instruments is an accordion.

As well as a gamut of ethnic styles ranging from France's own *musette* to klezmer, from Brazil's *forró* to Louisiana's zydeco, and so on, jazz, punk, pop and rock bands are there too, as is tango. Just as the music is very varied, there is a whole variety of venues and settings in which it's performed, all very close together in the town centre, only five

or six minutes' walk – or ten minutes' stagger – between the furthest apart. Even better, most of them are free entry.

The combination is winning. Only performances in the modest municipal theatre or the big marquee are ticketed. Otherwise, you just stroll – or squeeze – your way into a tent, bar or little square, all of them strung along the riverside or around the medieval cathedral. Only if you sit down in a café or bistro venue do you have to pay, by ordering something – *pas de problème*.

In a big marquee between the cathedral and the river, the 2009 festival swung into action with the superb French accent of the Super Swing Musette de Paris featuring Jean-Claude Laudat. In the spotlights, as Laudat expanded and closed the instrument's multiple folds and his fingers danced on the button keys, the pearly motifs 'Maugein' and 'Tulle' glistened and sparkled.

Up the riverside at a crowded café, a duo is playing Cajun, the extended concertina like a blood-red snake, so long is the pleated

sound chamber. Across the river on another café terrace, a young French duo of female accordionist and male guitarist is wowing a full house with clever word-play and exuberant music-making in the *chanson* tradition.

Its façade bathed in blue light, the little riverside theatre [pictured above] is a gem. It's here that the big name acts or the more acoustically refined performers play, with *chanson* legend Juliette Greco and virtuoso jazz accordionist Richard Galliano performing in 2010. "The atmosphere is beautiful at Nuits de Nacre," Galliano tells a TV interviewer. "I remember in 1988, there were just two concerts, one in the cathedral cloisters with Astor Piazzolla's quintet, no less. It was just a tiny dinghy, then it became a pleasure boat, and now it's, well, a steamship."

In 2009 at the theatre, the Siberian Quartet – four music teachers from beyond the Urals with superb technique – skipped through Russian folk songs on accordion, *balalaika* and contrabass *balalaika* – a gigantic instrument. After each rendition, they all stood up and bowed.

Such formality is not the normal Nuits de Nacre way, however. This is very much a festival of rollicking good times – '*laissez les bons temps rouler*' as the Cajuns say – in the streets and bars rather than of hush-hush concerts. Take Les Dénicheurs (The Uneathers), three wags on a sidewalk busking 1930s numbers dug up from old 78s. Or crammed into a small bar, an intense java-rock duo called Hinkala – imagine The Clash trimmed to an electric accordion and guitar doing Piaf and Brecht and you've got it.

Though spoilt for choice, director Lamy picks out a couple of highlights for the 2011 edition. "This year's key act is Chango Spasiuk from Argentina, a wizard of the *chamamé* regional style, and then there's the exceptional harmonica player, Greg Zlap," she says, choosing from amongst a host of

acts, giving about 90 performances in total. Three more are Place des Arts, whose latest album title, *Chanson Ska Musette*, tells you a lot; the dynamic quartet Imaz'Elia who blend Gypsy, Andalusian and Arab musical forms and Sergent Pépère, a brass-based sextet mixing tango, funk, samba and jazz, cheering lonely hearts and anybody else.

Though a perennial success, adored by musicians, festival-goers and locals alike, Nuits de Nacre doesn't rest on its laurels. "Every year we re-arrange things to suit the audience better," says Lamy, an accordionist herself. "The town itself changes, and we change too. This year we're completely reorganising the festival village around the cathedral and adding a floating stage on the river."

I could have gone away from Tulle with an instrument myself – not a Maugein accordion, but a Gypsy violin. Paulo Guta, the Romanian violinist with Divano Dromensa, a quintet who play an energy-charged music that slaloms through the Slavic and Mediterranean worlds, was desperate to sell his fiddle. "I gotta go to Bucharest tonight to get a new passport. I need money. Only 300 euros for this, you can get 500 for it, easy," he pleaded, as we put back some tasty local wine in the refreshment tent. Unluckily for him, I was just wild for his music, not his violin.

If you're not an expert on the accordion world, you may go to Tulle knowing none of the performers beforehand. But be assured, you'll end up knowing and loving a great many before you leave, perhaps personally. It's that kind of festival – excellent vibes, easy friendships, no hassles and as fresh and crackling as your morning baguette. ●

DATES The 2011 Nuits de Nacre Festival runs from September 15-18

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Bottom, from left to right: posters from previous editions of the festival; an accordionist with Les Amis de la Bourree de St Pierre; the Siberian Quartet featuring the giant *balalaika* and the Maugein accordion factory