

Megève France

Under the towering presence of Mont Blanc, *Freya Parr* visits a quiet town's eclectic new festival celebrating music, art, food and cinema



Here comes the sun: Mont Blanc looms over Megève; (above) The Beatles, who inspired the festival's name



Tucked away in the shadow of Mont Blanc in the French Alps – right on the border of Switzerland and Italy – is the charming town of Megève. In winter, it's a haven of snow sports, with some of the best ski slopes in Europe and the largest indoor sports centre the Alps has to offer. In the summer months, however, the hustle and bustle die down. What's left is a lush green mountain range with views up to Mont Blanc, a thriving hiking community and, as of 2018, a music festival with a bit of a difference.

The peculiarly named Megève Festival Savoy Truffle is so called because of its region – Savoy – and takes its inspiration from the 1968 song of that title by The Beatles, a band renowned for their commitment to a blend of musical styles. Festival director and former Verbier executive Guido Houben explains why The Beatles encompassed everything he was trying to achieve with his new festival: 'They made innovative music of the highest quality incorporating elements of various genres – classical music, jazz, rhythm and blues – which is exactly what this festival aims to do.'

Unlike the raft of other music festivals in the area – including Megève's major jazz festival, which takes place every spring

Mountain music:
Lucero Tena plays the
castanets with harpist
Xavier de Maistre



with consistently starry line-ups – Savoy Truffle refuses to limit itself to one genre. Alongside more traditional recitals are concerts combining music with dance, poetry and drama. The first concert on last year's festival programme features two singers, an actor, bass clarinet, drums and an organ grinder, blending experimental music with performance art and physical theatre. In another, an artist paints during the concert, reacting to the music.

Between events, do take the opportunity to venture up to the mountains and take in the spectacular views from as many vantage points as possible. In summer, a few cable cars are still running, so you can cover quite a lot of ground without breaking a sweat. The landscape is diverse: you'll pass streams, cascading waterfalls, grassy plains, vast lakes and fields of sheep, horses and cows on your walks between concerts. A mountaintop picnic lunch can be enjoyed alongside the calming sound of distant cowbells.

The town itself is a simple but welcoming place to return to after an afternoon of hiking. Once a popular ski destination for the French aristocracy, Megève still has an affluent feel, with designer shops making up most of its high street. But it's still more relaxed than the bigger resorts – a network of winding paths and narrow roads join up various medieval-style town squares, which are home to local bars, restaurants and cafés, all of which are understandably quiet at this time of year. The silence is broken only by the sound of rivers flowing through the centre of the town – in fact, the name

'Megève' comes from the Celtic name 'Mageva', meaning the village on water. All in all, it's a very peaceful place to host a music festival.

Savoy Truffle makes use of the ancient Alpine town and its historic architecture, experimenting with its venues as much as its programming. Although many concerts take place in a conference room in Megève's enormous sports complex (with

You'll pass cascading waterfalls and vast lakes on your walks between concerts

the sound of cheering ice hockey fans often leaking through the walls), the festival also hosts concerts in pretty local churches. One venue, though, is particularly idyllic. 'We held a concert right next to an artificial lake, which harpist Xavier de Maistre performed in front of with the flamenco dancer Lucero Tena, who played the castanets,' Houben tells me. 'The scenery was amazing – there was a sunset over the lake.'

Each year, an overarching theme ties the fortnight together. Most recently, the festival celebrated Latin America with events scheduled throughout the day. There are daily lunches with visiting artists and film screenings that complement the music. 'There are quite a few festivals in this area,' says Houben. 'But



Raise a glass:
sample some
tasty local wine

Food, glorious food

Megève's delicacies

Megève is a gastronomic haven, with 89 restaurants – three of which have Michelin stars – and 23 farms and producers. With dishes centred around local cheeses such as Emmentaler and Raclette, baked potatoes, wild plants from the mountains and meat cooked on hot rocks, traditional Savoyard cooking is highly calorific, to keep people warm during the harsh Alpine winters. Blueberries flourish in these colder climates, so are often used in fruit tarts, another Megève delicacy. The region's vineyards are also renowned, so you can round off your meal with a chilled glass of Haute-Savoie white wine.

many of those are just a series of concerts driven by big-name artists, rather than a themed programme.' Before an evening of tango, for instance, the 1998 musical film *Tango* is screened in the town's very own cinema. The movie's visual aesthetics set the scene perfectly for the evening's concert: a selection of vibrant works by Argentinian and Mexican composers, accompanied by two dancers who afterwards put on a simple tango class for audience members.

It's rare to find a festival with such an eclectic programme across the arts – not least one in the middle of a spectacular Alpine mountain range. For those wanting to step away from the familiarity of the big European festivals, Megève might just be the perfect place to see off the last weeks of summer. ☺

Further information:

For details of the 2020 Megève Festival Savoy Truffle, visit www.savoytruffle.fr